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HANDBOOKS



# The Routledge Handbook of the Other Backward Classes in India

Thought, Movements and Development

Edited by Simhadri Somanaboina and Akhileshwari Ramagoud

# THE ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOK OF THE OTHER BACKWARD CLASSES IN INDIA

This handbook presents an authoritative account of the development of movements, thoughts and policies of the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in India. Despite the adoption of egalitarian principles in the Indian Constitution, caste inequalities, discrimination and exclusionary practices against people from backward classes and other lower castes continue to haunt them in contemporary India.

A comprehensive work on the politics of identity and plurality of experiences of OBCs in India, this handbook:

- Features in-depth research by eminent scholars on Other Backward Class (OBC) social and political thought, OBC movements and OBC development and policy making.
- Discusses the life, ideologies and pioneering contributions of Gautam Buddha, Sant Kabir, Jotirao Phule, Savitribai Phule, Shahu Maharaj, Narayana Guru, B. R. Ambedkar, Ram Manohar Lohia, E.V. Ramasamy Periyar and leading social reform movements.
- Examines OBC issues with case studies from various Indian states to look at issues of pre- and post-Mandal India, backward caste movements and reclamation of the Bahujan legacy.
- Critiques public policies and programs for the development of OBCs in India.
- Reviews the status of Muslim OBCs in India and of the invisibilized nomadic communities.
- Reviews the impact of globalization on the economically backward lower castes and the impact of development initiatives for the excluded people.

The first of its kind, this handbook will be essential reading for scholars and researchers of exclusion and discrimination studies, diversity and inclusion studies, Global South studies, affirmative action, sociology, Indian political history, Dalit studies, political sociology, public policy, development studies and political studies.

**Simhadri Somanaboina** is a former Professor at Osmania University, India. He was associated with the Department of Geography and Geoinformatics for 35 years. He has published on development studies, urban, regional and environmental studies and geoinformatics. His interests are in social activism and marginalized people. He has published books on the internal colonization of Telangana, election atlas and caste studies and has been

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*Edited by Simhadri Somanaboina and  
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# CONTENTS

<i>List of figures</i>	<i>viii</i>
<i>List of tables</i>	<i>ix</i>
<i>List of contributors</i>	<i>xii</i>
<i>Foreword</i>	<i>xvii</i>
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>xxiii</i>
Introduction	1
 <b>PART I</b>	
<b>Thought and ideology</b>	<b>9</b>
1 The backward god: Gautama Buddha's liberative agenda for the Shudra/OBCs	11
<i>Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd</i>	
2 Contesting caste: The revolutionary movement of the sant-poets	19
<i>Braj Ranjan Mani</i>	
3 Thought and ideology of Jotirao Phule	38
<i>Gail Omvedt</i>	
4 Reclaiming Savitribai Phule: Life and times of a forgotten liberator	54
<i>Nilekha Salunke</i>	
5 Shahu Maharaj and OBC empowerment in Maharashtra	70
<i>Bharat Patankar</i>	

6 Dr Ambedkar and <i>Annihilation of Caste</i> <i>K. Srinivasulu</i>	87
7 Narayana Guru and formation of political society in Kerala: A contemporary critique <i>K. V. Cybil</i>	100
8 E.V. Ramasami Periyar on caste-society and category-wise rights <i>G. Aloysius</i>	112
9 Dr Lohia's socialist thought and empowering people <i>Simhadri Somanaboina and Akhileshwari Ramagoud</i>	153
<b>PART II</b>	
<b>Backward class movements</b>	<b>173</b>
10 OBCs and social justice <i>M. N. Rao</i>	175
11 Mandal, Mandal Commission and making of an OBC identity <i>Arvind Kumar</i>	184
12 The other backward classes: Pre- and post-Mandal India <i>Simhadri Somanaboina</i>	215
13 Backward Caste Movement: The Tamil Nadu experience <i>K. A. Manikumar</i>	254
14 Backward class movement in Karnataka <i>M. Gurulingaiah</i>	281
15 Politics and public policy of the dominant castes towards backward classes in Andhra Pradesh from 1956–2014: A critical analysis <i>E. Venkatesu</i>	290
16 OBC movement in Maharashtra: Reclaiming the Bahujan legacy <i>Lata Pratibha Madhukar</i>	305
17 OBC leadership and electoral politics in Uttar Pradesh <i>A. K. Verma</i>	321
18 Understanding backward caste movement in contemporary Bihar <i>Sanjay Kumar</i>	342

*Contents*

19 The other backward classes in Bengal: Exclusion, exploitation and empowerment <i>Mahua Sarkar</i>	355
<b>PART III</b>	
<b>OBC development and policies</b>	<b>387</b>
20 Contextualizing the backward classes discourse <i>G. Aloysius</i>	389
21 Modernization, social exclusion and empowerment of OBCs in India: A study of Gujarat <i>Santosh Kumar and D. Sriram</i>	417
22 Other Backward Classes and state policies in Uttar Pradesh <i>Chitaranjan Das Adhikary</i>	433
23 The status of Muslim OBCs in India: Inclusion/exclusion of Muslim OBCs in the process of modernization and development <i>Syed Amin Jafri</i>	444
24 Status of backward-caste artisans in India: An Appraisal <i>K. Murali Manohar</i>	479
25 OBC women in Nizamabad, Telangana: Entrenched inequality, a narrative of four castes <i>Akhileshwari Ramagoud</i>	509
26 The nomadic and semi-nomadic communities of Telangana: A ground report <i>Akhileshwari Ramagoud and Simhadri Somanaboina</i>	536
27 Media in India: Free to exclude? <i>P. L. Vishweshwer Rao</i>	562
28 The OBC vote in North India: Trends and patterns <i>Sanjay Kumar and Pranav Gupta</i>	585
<i>Index</i>	597

# FIGURES

21.1	Category-wise distribution of land in Gujarat 2005–6 (percent)	424
21.2	Gender differences in missed vaccinations	427
28.1	Subdivisions within OBCs in North India	590

# TABLES

5.1	Caste and Employment in Kolhapur	71
5.2	Percentage and Distribution of the Major Castes	72
12.1	Employees of Central Government	217
12.2	Representation of OBCs, SCs and STs in Group A & B Posts of 55 Central Government Departments (as on January 1, 2013)	217
12.3	Caste-wise Breakdown of Teaching Faculty in IIT Bombay (September 24, 2012)	217
12.4	Caste-wise Breakdown of Top Management in Gail (India) Limited— Public Sector Undertaking (March 13, 2015)	218
12.5	Representation of OBC, SC and ST Employees in Public Sector Banks (October 1, 2015)	219
12.6	Caste Representation in Supreme Court	219
12.7	State-wise Pattern of OBC Reservation	220
14.1	Reservation Has Been Accorded to the OBCs of Karnataka under Article 15(4) and Article 16(4) of the Constitution for Education and Appointments	288
15.1	Groups, Castes, and Percentage of Reservations	299
15.2	Party Politics and Accommodation of Backward Classes: Caste Affiliation of Indian National Congress MLAs, 1955–99 (in Percentage)	301
15.3	Caste Affiliation of TDP MLAs, 1983–2004 (in Percentage)	302
17.1	OBC Categories in UP	324
17.2	OBC Preference for BJP–SP	327
17.3	Caste Profile of Uttar Pradesh	331
17.4	Population Estimates of OBCs	332
17.5	Electoral Performance of the Samajwadi Party (SP) in UP (1980–2014)	334
17.6	Region-wise Performance of the SP in Lok Sabha and Assembly Elections (1989–2004)	335
17.7	Region-wise Performance of the SP in LS and Assembly Elections (2007–14)	336

*Tables*

17.8	SP Vote Share in Lok Sabha Elections (2004–9)	336
17.9	SP Vote Share in Assembly Elections (2007–12).	337
17.10	SP Gains during 2009–12.	337
18.1	Caste, Class and Land Ownership in the Plains of Rural Bihar	345
18.2	Caste Composition of Parties and Coalitions in Power in Bihar Vidhan Sabha, 1962–77 (Figures in Percentage)	346
18.3	Caste-wise Breakdown of Members of Bihar Vidhan Sabha 1967–2000 (Figures in Absolute Numbers)	350
21.1	State-wise Expenditure under the Pre-Matric/Post-Matric and Hostels for OBC Students (2011–12), in Rs Lakh.	430
21.2	Percentage of Females Attending Educational Institutions.	431
24.1	Distribution of Social Groups by State and Region (in Percentage)	493
24.2	Income Inequality (Gini Coefficient) by Rural Socio-Religious Category	497
24.3	Formality of Work and Sectors (Pre-Divided Andhra Pradesh)	498
24.4	Individual Level Work Status (Pre-Divided Andhra Pradesh)	499
24.5	Main Household Source of Income in the Combined State of Andhra Pradesh—2009–10( Distribution within Each Source of Income by Social Groups)	500
24.6	SRCs by Consumption Deciles (Pre-Divided Andhra Pradesh)	501
24.7	Monthly Per Capita Consumption Expenditure (Rs) Regions and Social Groups (2007–8)	502
27.1	Caste-wise Breakdown of Ownership and Managing Directors of Telugu Newspapers	577
27.2	Caste-wise Breakdown of Editors and Key Decision-makers of Telugu Newspapers	577
27.3	Caste-wise Breakdown of Ownership, Managing Directors and CEOs of Electronic News Media	578
27.4	Caste-wise Breakdown of Owners, Managing Directors, CEOs and Key Decision-makers in Electronic Media	578
27.5	Caste-wise Breakdown of Editorial Staff of Telugu Newspapers	579
27.6	Caste-wise Breakdown of Editors, Bureau Chiefs and Decision-makers in Telugu Newspapers	580
27.7	Caste-wise Breakdown of Journalists Working for Telugu TV News Channels	581
27.8	Caste-wise Breakdown of Newspaper Ownership and Decision-makers in Hyderabad-based English-language Newspapers	583
27.9	Caste-wise Breakdown of Accredited Journalists in the Telangana Media in 2016	583
28.1	Voting Patterns of OBCs in India: Overall for Lok Sabha Elections 1996–2014 (in Percentage)	586
28.2	Voting Pattern of OBCs in North India (Lok Sabha Elections 1996 – 2014) (in Percentage)	587
28.3	Voting Pattern of OBCs in Bihar (in Percentage)	588
28.4	Voting Pattern of OBCs in Haryana (in Percentage)	588

*Tables*

28.5 Voting Pattern of OBCs in Madhya Pradesh (in Percentage)	588
28.6 Voting Pattern of OBCs in Rajasthan (in Percentage)	589
28.7 Voting Pattern of OBCs in Uttar Pradesh (in Percentage)	589
28.8 Voting Pattern within OBCs in Bihar (in Percentage)	591
28.9 Voting Pattern within OBCs in Uttar Pradesh (in Percentage)	591
28.10 Voting Pattern within OBCs in Madhya Pradesh (in Percentage)	592

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# FOREWORD

*Christophe Jaffrelot*

It is a great pleasure for me to preface this book on the Other Backward Classes. The “OBC phenomenon” that crystallized in the 1990s has been part of what I have called a “silent revolution” (Jaffrelot 2003), a socio-political process resulting in some social emancipation and in the rise to some political power of plebeians who had been marginalized for years, if not centuries. The “Mandal moment” was primarily political, even if what was at stake was the extension of positive discrimination. The trigger was the decision by V. P. Singh to implement the report of the Mandal Commission, named for its chairman, B. P. Mandal, which had concluded in the late 1970s that the situation of the OBCs was dire enough—due to their poor access to land ownership as tenant farmers or landless peasants and their poor education—that a program of positive discrimination needed to be designed for them. It recommended 27 percent reservation for them in the civil services, in addition to the 15 percent and the 7 percent in favor of the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and the Scheduled Tribes (STs) that were mandated by the Indian Constitution. The project had been shelved as soon as Congress had been voted back into office in 1980, but the Janata Dal tabled it again, and Prime Minister V. P. Singh even decided to implement it in 1990 (Jaffrelot 2009). The upper castes instantly mobilized and took to the streets to prevent a reform that would curb their public sector job opportunities—which remained the most valuable ones before the 1991 liberalization. Their resistance aroused indignation among the lower castes, which formed a common front to challenge the old clientelist rationale. Now many OBCs stopped voting for upper-caste notables and instead sent representatives from their own social milieu to parliament. Thus, the uneducated, usually rural, masses, long kept on the margins of power, became a force to be reckoned with in the political arena. The proportion of OBC MPs from the Hindi belt—the most important battlefield—in the lower house of parliament, the Lok Sabha (People’s Assembly) doubled, reaching more than 20 percent, thanks to Janata Dal and its regional offshoots.

The Janata Dal fell apart in the early 1990s, but that did not affect the dynamics of democratization that it had set in motion—the famous “silent revolution.” First, all parties, including Congress, now resigned themselves to fielding a number of OBC candidates, being unable to rely on former clientelist mechanisms: As OBCs made up over half of the population, the new “OBC vote” could not be ignored. Second, new public policies designed to defend the interests of lower castes were implemented not only by the parties representing them, but also by Congress which, when it returned to power in 2004, set a

quota of 27 percent for OBCs in public universities—again provoking the ire of the upper castes, a decision known as “Mandal II.”

Thirty years later, what is left of the “Mandal moment,” politically as well as socially?

### Modi and the Hindu nationalist counter-revolution

This phase in the democratization of Indian democracy to the detriment of the former elites brought on a counter-revolution—a sequence of action/reaction that one could find elsewhere: after all Donald Trump has also capitalized on the resentment of the white (lower) middle class *vis-à-vis* the minorities that Obama had empowered. The Hindu nationalist party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP—Indian People’s Party), became the vanguard of this revenge of the elite—an Indian-style conservative revolution. This backlash took the path of an ideology dating back to the 1920s, Hindutva, and which at the turn of the 21st century had the advantage of transcending caste identities in the name of Hindu unity and its defense against Islam, increasingly perceived as a threat. But the backlash was not yet strong enough to do more than conquer a few states (in the 1990s) or win more than a relative majority and thus to form coalition governments (as in the years 1998–2004). The BJP was not truly in a position to govern on its own until 2014, when it interlaced Hindutva with populism, an alchemy achieved by a man his supporters viewed as providential, Narendra Modi—who happened to belong to an OBC caste too.

Modi’s plebeian background has helped him to reorient the traditional OBC politics in favor of the BJP. He belongs to the Ghanchi caste, which produces and sells cooking oil, a caste that was classified as part of the OBCs in the late 1990s. His father traded in it, but also ran a tea shop. As Chief Minister of Gujarat, between 2001 and 2014, he claimed that he was an *aam admi*, a common man. To underscore his modest background, Modi explained that he had to work as a child serving tea in his father’s shop. The *chaiwalla* (teaboy) theme was highly successful among members of the middle class who swear by the virtues of hard work and merit. Not only did Modi present himself as a self-made man, but he also refused to defend positive discrimination—from which he had never benefited. But his social background also put him on equal footing with the OBC masses, as he was from the same milieu: For the first time, a BJP leader from a lower caste could rise to power, making his peers swell with pride.

In 2014, Modi made copious use of his lowly social background, a theme that he had not highlighted to that extent in Gujarat. This was because in some parts of India, such as Bihar, the lower caste repertoire had far more resonance. He resorted to this register to distinguish himself from the Nehru/Gandhis whom he continued to depict as monarchical heirs who held the underprivileged in contempt. He now called Rahul “Mr Golden Spoon” (The Hindu 2013), targeting the “establishment” in a manner typical of the populists described by Mudde and Kaltwasser.<sup>1</sup> He also tore into Rahul’s sister, Priyanka, in a very revealing manner. As Modi explained in a rally that the only reason she was in politics was out of filial piety. Priyanka retorted that the level of such a remark was “low,” a word Modi immediately interpreted as a reference to his caste. In a television interview with Arnab Goswami, he went on the defensive:

don’t I have the right to at least state the truth? Is it because I come from a humble background, from a humble family? Has this country become like that? Has my democracy submitted itself to one family? And when a poor man says something, there is uproar

(Mid Day 2014).

Goswami, whose interview was a model of complacency, of course, did not object that there were no insinuations about social hierarchy in Priyanka Gandhi's remark.

Casting himself as the standard-bearer for India's downtrodden—for the people against the patricians—in an election rally in Muzaffarpur, Bihar, Modi added that the next decade would belong to Dalits and OBCs (Palshikar and Suri 2014).

### **OBCs as the core group of the neo-middle class?**

Beyond this pedigree, Modi symbolizes the rise of a new social category—which he himself dubbed the “neo-middle class.” This class came into being in the first decade of the 2000s owing to the rise of lower caste elements that had benefited from the post-Mandal quotas and two-digit economic growth in the wake of economic liberalization. Indeed, Modi's appeal among certain OBCs can also be explained by the emergence of a class aspect. Internal differentiation by income is gradually affecting large OBC castes, as their members migrate from village to the city. This exodus is tied in with the farming crisis, but it is also due to the attraction of urban jobs, whether in industry or in the service professions. Even if such jobs are unstable and badly paid, they usually enable these former rurals to improve their living conditions. New urban dwellers, whether they went to the city or the city came to them on the crest of a particularly dynamic urbanization process in Gujarat, make up a new form of semi-urban class that Modi was the first to name: In the 2012 BJP election manifesto (for the state elections of Gujarat) he referred to them as the “neo-middle class,” explaining the formation of this new category by double-figure industrial and services growth over the preceding ten years (*The Times of India* 2012). Local observers viewed this more as a grey area comprised of those who had lifted themselves out of poverty but who were not yet part of the middle class (Pathak and Makkar 2012). They could afford a two-wheeler, but not a Nano, a few household appliances, but not any brown goods, hard-wall accommodation, but far from city centers. By leaving their rural environment, this young population's political culture tended to change: They became more entrepreneurial and believed that Modi, with his promises of development, would meet their aspirations. They are more susceptible to the political propaganda diffused through the media and social networks in cities where, contrary to the village world, religious mixing has become rare due to the ghettoization of Muslims (Gayer and Jaffrelot 2012). It is indeed all the easier to instill fear of others when one has little contact with them. For all these reasons, OBCs who left the countryside and became part of the “neo-middle class” have tended to switch from the Congress to the BJP.

To sum the two sections above: While Vajpayee's BJP attracted upper-caste voters who saw the BJP as protection against positive discrimination, Modi's BJP lures the same profile *as well as* those who had benefited from positive discrimination and growth, who turned to him because he was one of them and felt as being less part of the OBCs as of the neo-middle class. Therefore, the “Modi phenomenon” has supplanted the “OBC phenomenon” by obliterating caste identities in two ways: On the basis of class and on the basis of religion. OBCs were now required to consider themselves as part of a class and as Hindu first.

### **Reservations divide the OBCs**

However, the decline of OBC politics is also due to other factors. First, OBC politics has been a victim of the success of OBC policies in two ways. On the one hand, the center and all the states, one after the other, introduced the famous 27 percent quota. With that, a saturation point was reached as the judiciary did not want the total amount of reservation to go

beyond 49 percent. Parties representing the OBCs could not say, “vote for me, you’ll get more reservations.”

On the other hand, some OBCs have benefited from this policy more than others. This is evident at the *jati* level. The same way some Dalit *jatis* have cornered most of the quotas (Jatavs in Uttar Pradesh (UP) and Mahars in Maharashtra, Malas in the undivided Andhra Pradesh are cases in point), some OBC *jatis* have cornered the OBC quotas too. In this volume, A. K. Verma and Santosh Kumar illustrate this problem in UP and Bihar by referring to the case of the Yadavs who have been over-represented at the political level thanks to the electoral success of the Samajwadi Party of Mulayam Singh and then Akhilesh, as well as by the resilience of the Rashtriya Janata Dal of Laloo Prasad Yadav. We can infer that Yadavs have cornered more reservations as shown by the Indian Human Development Survey. The survey shows that in UP, 14.5 percent of the Yadavs occupied a salaried job in 2011–12 (the last round of the survey), against 5.8 percent for the Kurmis, 5.7 percent for the Telis, 6.7 percent for the Kushwhahas and 3.5 percent for the Lodhis.

The Yadavization of UP and Bihar when they were governed by these two parties has divided the OBCs. Some *jatis* were alienated to such an extent that they started not to vote along with the Yadavs. In Bihar, Kurmis followed Nitish Kumar and created a separate party as early as 1994. In UP, the BJP was shrewd enough to nominate candidates from non-Yadav *jatis* in order to consolidate the non-Yadav OBC votes by capitalizing on the resentment of these castes *vis-à-vis* the dominant Yadavs. This strategy was obvious in the 2019 elections.

This is why poor OBCs have voted more for the BJP than for the Bahujan Samaj Party-Samajwadi Party (BSP-SP) alliance, in spite of the elitist image of the party: 59 percent of the “poor” OBCs supported BJP, against 33.5 percent who turned to the alliance. The fact that “rich” and “middle” class OBCs voted more for the BSP-SP alliance and that “poor” OBCs supported more the BJP is understandable the moment *jatis* are factored in: The SP remains a Yadav party to a large extent, and Yadavs tend to be richer than the average OBC. According to the Indian Human Development Survey, the mean income of the Yadavs was second only to the Kurmis, at Rs17,894 in 2011–12, against Rs16,060 for the Gadariyas, Rs15,064 for the Kushwhahas, Rs12,789 for the Telis and Rs10,300 for the Lodhis (Jaffrelot and Kalaiyasan 2019). As the non-Yadav OBCs, who often belong to poorer strata of society, usually resent the Yadav domination, and the way they corner most of the reservations in particular, the BJP has successfully wooed them by nominating many candidates from this milieu. Whereas 27 percent of the SP candidates were Yadavs in 2019, Yadavs represented only 1.3 percent of the candidates of the BJP which, on the contrary, gave tickets to 7.7 percent Kurmis and 16.7 percent “Other OBCs,” who often came from small caste groups (Verniers 2019). This strategy translated into votes: While 60 percent of the Yadavs voted for the SP-BSP alliance, 72 percent of the “Other OBCs” supported the BJP (Beg 2019), showing that the OBC milieu was now polarized along *jati* lines.

In the Hindi belt, the share of representation among OBCs of non-dominant groups has nearly doubled, rising from 22 percent in 2004 to 49 percent in 2019. Simultaneously, the overall number of groups represented has also increased during this period from 17 different OBC groups represented in 2004 to 26 in 2019. Thus, while three OBC groups remain over-represented—Yadavs, Kurmis and Gujjars—other OBC groups have gained representation but stand divided: The 23 non-dominant OBC MPs elected from the Hindi belt in 2019 belong to 20 different castes.

This evolution is a reflection of the BJP’s strategy aiming at undermining OBC politics. On the one hand, the OBC MPs are scattered. On the other, dominant OBCs are weakened. Both developments are the two faces of the same coin: The decline of the Yadavs, in particular,

stems from their partial exclusion from the BJP, which, instead, seeks to mobilize non-dominant OBC voters. The relative rise of non-dominant OBC MPs does not constitute a threat to the pre-eminence of dominant OBC MPs (mostly Kurmis) among the BJP, nor does it constitute a challenge to upper-caste dominance (Jaffrelot and Verniers 2020).

### **Reservations divide OBC jatis**

Not only have reservations further divided OBCs along *jati* lines, but they have also divided some OBC *jatis* along class lines as all the members of any *jati* have not had equal access to quotas (Jaffrelot and Kalaiyaran 2019). Caste politics remained resilient in UP where “poor” Yadavs and “rich” Yadavs voted for the SP-BSP alliance in the same proportions, as if the former thought that the SP would help them the clientelistic way, whereas the latter thought that the SP would remain the best avenue to power. But the situation was very different in Bihar where the richer they were, the more Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD)-oriented Yadav voters were too (Jaffrelot 2019), as if the elite Yadavs—who had tasted power thanks to the RJD—preferred to stick to it, whereas the others shifted to other patrons (including the BJP).

The divisions of the OBCs were not subsumed by the reservations—which, on the contrary, accentuated them, partly because they were not the panacea some expected. Indeed, they have not represented a huge number of seats for at least two reasons. First, the quotas have not been fulfilled. OBCs represented 8.37 percent of Class A in the Central Government Services, 10.01 percent of Class B and 17.98 percent of Class C.<sup>2</sup> Certainly, the percentage of the OBCs in the Central Public Sector Enterprises (CPSEs) jumped from 16.6 percent in 2004 to 28.5 percent in 2014. But how many jobs do these percentages represent? The number of jobs for the OBCs has increased from 1.38 lakhs to 4.55 lakhs between 2003 and 2012 in the Central Government Services—quite an achievement compared to the evolution on the side of the Dalits. Indeed, the number of Dalits benefiting from reservations in the Central Government Services has been reduced by 16 percent from 5.40 lakhs to 4.55 lakhs—exactly the same number as on the side of the OBCs who represent 52 percent of society, according to the Mandal report (against 16 percent of SCs). In the CPSEs, the inverted curve has started for the OBCs too: While the number of OBCs benefiting from reservations had jumped from 14.89 lakhs in 2008 to 23.55 lakhs in 2012, it has dropped to 23.38 lakhs the year after. How can we explain these trends?

First the public sector is shrinking. On the one hand, the number of vacancies has surged, from 5.5 lakhs in 2006 to 7.5 lakhs in 2014 (no data are available since then) so far as central government employment is concerned. The trend has continued. For instance, the number of civil service candidates shortlisted by the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) has dropped by almost 40 percent between 2014 and 2018, from 1,236 to 759. Second, the total number of employees dropped dramatically between 2003 and 2012, from 32.69 lakhs to 26.30 lakhs in the Central Government Services and, in the CPSEs, from 91.84 lakhs in 2004 to 81.93 lakhs in 2014, mostly at the expense of the “General” category though.

This decline can be explained by the privatization of some PSUs as well as the use of contract laborers. In the Central Government Services, it is also partly due to the creation of a lateral entry in the bureaucracy. By the end of his first term, Narendra Modi implemented one of the promises of the 2014 BJP election manifesto about the creation of lateral entry in the Indian administration. This reform was intended “to draw expertise from the industry, academia and society into the services.” In February 2019, 89 applicants were shortlisted (out of 6,000 candidates from the private sector) for filling ten Joint Secretary posts. This new procedure undermined the reservations system because the quotas did not apply.

Last but not least, quotas have not been implemented as systematically as they used to be. For instance, in May 2020, the National Commission for Backward Classes issued a notice to the health ministry complaining that the post-Mandal 27 percent quota was not implemented systematically. Indeed, since 2017 under the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test, OBCs were not provided the 27 percent quota in the all-India seats which are pooled from state colleges. This loss represented about 10,000 seats in three years—which have been transferred to the general category.

Will the OBCs mobilize against the questioning of their post-Mandal benefits? In the 1990s, they formed a unified front in order to defend V. P. Singh's decision to implement the 27 percent quotas they had just been recognized. Can the undermining of this conquest result in the making of a new coalition across *jatis* and/or parties? That remains to be seen, but the excellent chapters which follow will help the reader to understand what the terms of the debate are.

## Notes

- 1 Mudde and Kaltwasser characterize populism as a “thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic camps, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite,’ and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people.” (Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2017, 6.).
- 2 All the data of this paragraph come from Government of India, Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment, Department of Social Justice & Empowerment, Statistical Division, *Handbook on Social Welfare Statistics*, New Delhi, January 2016, 347–52.

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For more than four decades, 52 percent of people in India lived without their identity being acknowledged or recognized, largely due to the indifference of the Indian state which delayed, often dithered, in identifying and enumerating the constitutionally mandated social category of the Other Backward Classes (OBCs). The opposition to the identification of OBCs began from the days of Constituent Assembly debates through post-independence India. The governments headed by Congress were guilty of inaction on this front and the inaction was facilitated by the leadership of not just the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party and also the communist parties. In fact, when the government headed by Janata Dal, a coalition partner of the National Front, made an announcement in the parliament to implement the Mandal Commission report's recommendation of 27 percent reservations to OBCs in central services (federal services) on August 7, 1990, the entire political spectrum of India—the right, the center and the left, headed by forward caste leadership—opposed it, sometimes overtly and often covertly. The student leadership, university community, scientific community, media and other civil society bodies, which are similarly dominated by the forward castes, were on the war-path against reservation for the OBCs. The illusion that backward classes were nurtured all along by the Indian ruling establishment was shattered with this united opposition to OBC reservation. The backward classes, including SCs, STs, OBCs and other democrats began to mobilize and organize themselves on their own in support of reservations, making reservation a common cause and forging an ideological unity among the Dalit-Bahujan educated classes of India. The nation was split down the middle into anti-reservation forward classes and pro-reservation backward classes. In fact, it was an ideological battle between the status quo-ist hegemonic/dominant classes versus the democratic forces aspiring and struggling for equality and social justice.

For several decades, the OBCs suffered for want of identity and were denied their share of power. With the onset of globalization, the little gains that OBCs made in post-independence India suffered a setback because of the introduction of policies of liberalization and privatization. The new challenges of globalization, liberalization and privatization have ensured that backwardness became perennial, giving very little chance to the marginalized to progress. In this context, this book *The Routledge Handbook of the Other Backward Classes in India* becomes significant in identifying the problems, studying the processes of development and coming up with solutions to integrate the excluded classes. The book would benefit the political classes, intelligentsia, policy makers, subalterns and civil society organizations, all of which are committed to a constitutionally mandated equal and just society.

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**Simhadri Somanaboina  
Akhileshwari Ramagoud  
Hyderabad**

# INTRODUCTION

Indian society is a textbook example of a hierarchical society. Innumerable castes and sub-castes are placed one above the other, and their ranking is accompanied by privileges and disadvantages *vis-à-vis* each other as well as amongst themselves. The general proposition that the social organization of the Indo-Aryans was based on the theory of *Chaturvarnya* and that *Chaturvarnya* means division of society into four classes of *Brahmins* (priests), *Kshatriyas* (soldiers), *Vaishyas* (traders) and *Shudras* (menials), fails to convey the real nature and the magnitude of the problem of the *Shudras*.

The system of *Chaturvarnya* was not a mere division of society into four classes. Besides dividing society into four orders, it made the principle of graded inequality the basis for determining the terms of association between the people of the four *Varnas*. This system of graded inequality was backed up by legal and penal provisions. Under the system of *Chaturvarnya*, the *Shudras* were placed at the bottom of the system and were subjected to several restrictions and limitations that ensured that they did not rise to the levels of those placed above them. Several protest and reformation movements were carried out over different periods, against the debilitating and unjust caste system, by such reformers as Gautama Buddha, Guru Nanak, Jotirao Phule, Sant Ravidas, Periyar Ramasami and Dr B. R. Ambedkar. While they achieved different levels of success, the system persists in the present.

## Neglect of OBCs

The persistence of caste inequalities, discrimination and exclusion of the Shudras in an independent India despite the adoption of egalitarian principles in the Indian Constitution reveals how deeply entrenched is the system and the specific inequalities that the caste system engendered. The caste system reproduces graded inequalities to adapt itself to changing conditions and keep not only the Scheduled Castes (SCs) oppressed but also exploit the Other Backwards Classes (OBCs). While the OBCs constitute the major segment of the victims of the caste system, their question was not considered as serious as perhaps that of the SCs since they suffered the ultimate ignominy of untouchability under the caste system. While the Constitution of India was being constructed with the declared set goals and objectives of bringing about fundamental change in the unequal structure of Indian society, Dr B. R. Ambedkar, the architect of the Constitution, admitted to overlooking the question of the Backward Classes as the

## *Introduction*

OBCs were then known as. He said, “I am very sorry that the Constitution did not embody any safeguards for the Backward Classes. It was left to be done by the Executive (of the Government) on the basis of recommendations of the commission to be appointed by the President.”

Punjabrao Deshmukh, a well-known social reformer from Maharashtra, a colleague of Dr Ambedkar, and a member of the committee that drafted the Constitution of India chaired by Ambedkar, in his last speech in the Constituent Assembly on November 25, 1949, highlighted the need for special attention to the Backward Classes:

The people who are known as backward communities of India, have not been treated as fairly as I would have liked them to be . . . it would be very desirable that the sympathy which we would show towards the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, should also in a measure be extended to these people who have yet to see any benefits accruing from the freedom that we have achieved.

### **Mandal Report as a landmark in the OBC movement in independent India**

Until the Mandal Commission Report brought into focus the problems and systemic exclusion of the OBCs from all spheres of post-independence development, nothing was done to set right this social injustice and inequality that a large section of the population suffered. Neither inclusionary strategies were evolved nor were the OBCs subject of any kind of academic research and systematic study that would have laid bare the pathetic socio-economic conditions of their lives. No attempt was made either to study the reformers in the past who guided and inspired the people with their ideas, thoughts and ideologies. This has resulted in the total neglect of the specific developmental, educational and ideological needs of the OBCs as there are no authentic data and studies that could have guided the policy makers. The situation is such that today half of the population of this country that comprises the OBCs continues to suffer serious social discrimination, economic exploitation and political marginalization. Their development has been notoriously tardy. Barring a few and totally insufficient efforts through various commissions, no scientific effort has been made either to define them or to accurately estimate their population through census or to identify and quantify the various problems they face and adequately address and redress those problems. In short, the OBCs have not got their due share in any field in the 73 years of independence, in consonance with their numbers in the country’s population.

The OBCs were divided and subdivided into many groups and subgroups only to serve the interests of those caste people who were traditionally placed above them in the social hierarchy. The OBCs produce the goods and services needed by society in general but they neither got respectable returns for their goods and services, nor were they accorded social respect and dignity for their labor and skills. Despite their numerical strength and the dependence of society on their goods and skills, the OBCs remained subordinate and subservient. They have not developed an identity of their own as one people which could have helped them to assert the power of their numbers and the main reason for that is that they are hugely diverse in terms of their occupations, and thanks to the concept of inferiority and superiority of each caste in terms of caste hierarchy, they have remained divided, each concerned about their “own” people and their interests, especially in the modern times in an independent India. The separate identities of the various communities have been used by people with vested interests to keep the OBCs divided. At times, one caste group was either promoted over others or one caste pitted against another to ensure that the OBC groups did not develop a sense of single identity or commonality of purpose of seeking their share of benefits from the state, both economically and politically.

## **Reform movements**

There have been no lack of individuals and social reform movements in the past 100 years and more to awaken the people to the ills and undesirability of the iniquitous caste system, beginning with Gautama Buddha and followed, in modern times, by persons like Mahatma Jothirao Phule, Dr B. R. Ambedkar, Periyar Ramasamy, Narayana Guru, Shahu Maharaj and others. These efforts did bring about a measure of change in some regions. In the post-independence era, a few state governments initiated some measures for the upliftment of BCs/OBCs. Article 15 of the Constitution enabled the respective governments to reserve seats in educational institutions for SCs/STs/OBCs. This measure was beneficial but in a limited way. Later, in the 1980s and 1990s, the “Mandal Movement” resulted in a nationwide reservation policy to reserve 50 percent employment in the Central Services for the OBCs, in proportion to their population. But this policy was struck down by the Supreme Court and finally, only 27 percent reservation was granted to the OBCs. This measure, though limited, transformed the socio-economic character of a small segment among the BC communities. As of now the 27 percent reservation remains the single most influential strategy that continues to benefit the OBCs, although implemented half-heartedly by the privileged castes who dominate all the three pillars of a democracy, namely, the Legislature, Executive and the Judiciary.

Recent decades have marked a notable shift in the backward class movement that seems to move away from the clamor for *Kshatriya* status towards a demand for greater access to state resources, representation in civic institutions and state recognition of numerous sub-caste identities that exist at a local level. With the issue of reservation acquiring great salience in electoral politics, however, the question remains whether OBC as a category for public policy in contemporary India is still a measure for social and educational empowerment or if it has become a pawn on the political chessboard.

In this book, our attempt has been to explore studies in relation to social exclusion, empowerment and modernization of the OBCs. This volume makes a detailed examination of the evolution of the thought, ideas and ideologies encompassing ancient, medieval and modern times. It also makes a detailed evaluation of social movements in different states in India. The study explores the post-independence dream of development and modernization and its projects in the name of welfare state and globalization and their impact on different social groups, particularly OBCs. Our exploration into the developmental modernization revealed the fact that the exclusion of the OBCs appears to be a reality in the spheres of development, political power, culture and public and private institutions.

Though India initiated the movement for freedom from colonial rule with development and modernization as the objectives of nation-building, it continued the tradition of essentially excluding the traditionally oppressed social groups in mainstream India. OBCs, who constitute about 50 percent of the country’s population, did not receive attention from the state in terms of mainstreaming them developmentally. Therefore, the OBCs have remained on the fringes of the modernizing society. Policy-making institutions acknowledge the fact that there is a dire need to study the communities and their occupations so as to engage them in developmental planning of the country.

Considering that the study of OBCs is relatively less engaged and researched at the national level, this book will hopefully, guide further research and analysis on the vastly under-researched areas of different aspects of the OBCs.

The need to study and research various issues of the OBCs was voiced by the report of the Constitutional Review Commission, set up by the Parliament in 2000. The report, submitted in 2002, states:

There is a misconception that the problems of Scheduled Castes, the Scheduled Tribes, and the Backward Castes are marginal. In reality, these are part of the central and core problems of the country. That these categories of the people constitute three-fourths of the population of the country and almost the entire physical labour of the country is drawn from them. It is failure to tackle their problems so as to remove their disabilities and secure their full potential for national development that lies at the root of the many weaknesses faced by the post-Independence India to this day.

### **OB C women and their development**

The gender gap among the OBCs is enormous with OBC women lagging behind men in every social and economic indicator such as income, literacy, health, nutrition, ownership of land/property and life expectancy. The maternal mortality rate and infant mortality rate are higher among OBC women than the average all-India level. Besides, an epidemic of violence prevails among OBC women; they face domestic violence and sexual exploitation; OBC women are among the largest number of women trafficked into sex trade. Besides, OBC women and girls not only suffer from the general discrimination and deprivation that characterizes Indian women and girl children, the very fact that they belong to the excluded communities makes them more vulnerable and makes their situation more tenuous as they face multiple disadvantages.

### **Nomadic and de-notified tribes**

The nomadic and the de-notified tribes number a massive 60 million and are found across the country. The number of nomadic tribes is estimated to be 313 and the de-notified tribes 198. Due to various reasons, some of these tribes have been included in the list of SCs, STs and yet others in OBCs. Many more are reported to have been left out of all lists. While all of them suffer from neglect, discrimination, abuse, poverty, illiteracy, the so-called de-notified tribes or DNTs suffer the most horrendous stigma of being branded as “criminal tribes.” This stigma, a legacy of the colonial rulers, has continued to the present day with the result that violence against them by the police and exclusion by society is common. They have not been able to join the social mainstream as yet. Many of them do not have Aadhaar cards or ration cards which put them outside all state welfare measures. There are some amongst them who have never cast their vote. The book examines the issues facing this most neglected and disempowered group of people who are now part of the OBC category.

In this broad background, this book studies three major areas to understand, analyze and search for possible answers to improve the socio-economic-political-developmental status of the OBCs. These are 1) Thought and ideology; 2) Backward class movements; and 3) OBC development and policies.

- 1. Social thought and ideology:** India has had a rich history of movements for an egalitarian and casteless society marked by the revolutionary ideas and thoughts of reformers who mobilized the disempowered people to fight for equality and oppose the institutions of servitude, including religion and caste. These form a ready reference to present-day thinkers to hone and improve the ongoing thought and ideologies of Indian social scientists. The tyranny of the caste dominance in academic and research institutes has pushed even the major social thinkers belonging to the disadvantaged communities into the background and relegated them into oblivion. While there is an array of reformers and thinkers whom

the OBCs have owned, there is hardly any quality published material on them from the perspectives of the OBCs.

This project output consists of analytical articles on Buddha, sant-poets of the medieval period, the 19th century Shudra thinkers like Mahatma Jotirao Phule, Savitribai Phule, Shahi Maharaj and 20th century intellectual politicians B. R. Ambedkar, Narayan Guru and Periyar E. V. Ramasami Naicker. The context of anti-caste movements in the 19th and 20th centuries was broadly shaped by the colonial intervention and the national movement in the country. Anti-caste social thought, it is no exaggeration to suggest, has largely been shaped by the historical context of colonial modernity and the dynamism unleashed by it and inadequacies and silences of the nationalist movement to address the angst and deprivation of the backward social forces. At a higher level, the anti-caste idea and vision of India has potentially been in opposition to the idea of India implicit in the dominant nationalism. This is the reason why the anti-caste articulation as evident in the chapters in this section has largely and effectively been in contradiction with the Congress-led nationalist movement.

2. **Backward class movements:** The fast-paced change that is taking place in society—and the reasons are many, such as economic, social, technology, urbanization—has brought about an awakening among traditionally oppressed peoples, redefining or redrawing their social and economic relations and resulting in their socio-cultural-political assertion and formation of their identity, however small it may be. Based on the ranking of the various indices, the traditionally privileged castes remain at the top of the rank order; the middle and lower castes occupy the middle ranks, while those at the bottom of the caste hierarchy, are also at the bottom of the scale of forwardness, namely, the SCs and STs.

The chapters in this section deal with the backward class movements in the states of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh in southern India, Maharashtra and Gujarat in western India, Bihar and UP in northern India and Bengal in eastern India. These chapters show the futility in any attempt at generalization on an all-India scale, for there are huge differences among the Shudra communities in terms of their political economy of development, socio-cultural location and proximity or distance from the regimes of power and access to resources.

The generic legal category of OBC can be seen broadly covering four caste clusters in terms of their occupational cosmology. They are the artisanal castes, peasant castes, occupational castes and service castes.

The movements of these castes can be seen as encompassing different cardinal issues or in their combinational relation at different points of time. This has rendered the history of the backward caste movements quite complex, and they defy easy generalizations.

But as the chapters show there could be different phases or thrust issues identified in the history of the backward caste movements. These are: The occupational cooperative movements; identity movements; reservation movements; and movements for political power. Invariably the attention of these movements has been on the state and political regimes and dominant caste politics.

3. **OBC development and policies:** Development of inclusive policies by the State for OBCs has been the central concern of the OBC articulation and mobilization. This has quite certainly created political consciousness and, to some extent, political assertion. But this is neither uniform nor consistent across the castes considering the large numbers of the OBCs and the differential levels of awareness and development. With little capital at their disposal and most of the castes being on the margins of poverty, their political growth in terms of political power has been nominal, which is but a continuation of the traditional

## *Introduction*

marginalization of the OBCs in power-sharing even in modern times. A democracy where half of the people get no chance of fair representation in the elected bodies, with no chance of either getting a party ticket to contest elections or even getting nominated to a public office can be termed a nominal democracy. Only when the state reflects people's aspirations and in the running of which the majority of people participate to determine the common destiny of their nation will such a system be a true democracy. An important aspect of the excluded communities is that despite their shared exclusion at the hands of the privileged castes, they have not been very successful in forging a common identity superseding their respective caste identities, to put up a united fight for their due share in political-economic-social fields.

An important issue is the empowerment of women, considering that the women of the traditionally excluded communities bear the double burden of gender and caste and therefore are doubly disadvantaged. Since patriarchy is the mainstay of the Indian society (as in other societies), it cuts across the caste lines to suppress women, treat them as secondary citizens, making them vulnerable to physical, emotional and mental abuse and violence, exclude them from processes that empower such as education and employment, and keep them subjugated to merely serve the male society rather than exploring their intellectual resources to make a difference to the society.

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# PART I

## Thought and ideology

Outrageous inequality, discrimination of the worst kind, personal and collective denigration, deprivation and daily humiliation of the so-called low castes who comprise a majority in society has been borne stoically for several centuries by the people. However, at the same time, the injustice of the caste system regularly threw up rebels who formulated theses, mobilized people and led movements, mostly peaceful, to enthuse the masses to revolt against the system that had condemned them for life as “low” people.

While thinkers like Gautama Buddha, a prince who renounced his world of privilege to discover a new way of living and thinking, promoted a casteless society, reservation was introduced for the oppressed and the marginalized by Shahu Maharaj in his kingdom of Kolhapur about 150 years ago. Reformers spoke up against the religious and social practices that treated fellow people as less than humans and oppressed them. The new paths they showed and new thinking they evolved found resonance among the people.

Then there were remarkable poets who were subalterns who, over three centuries from 14th century onwards who made it their mission to bring about a change in the society where the majority of the people were enslaved in the name of caste. These “sant poets” or “saint poets” through their radical anti-caste poetry, brought about an awakening among the masses through the people’s language.

Foremost among reformers, Jotirao Phule is considered the forerunner of various social movements in Maharashtra. He promoted “truth-seeking” by the individual rather than follow religious dictates. He was the leading proponent of education for women as a measure to end gender inequality. Savitribai Phule, walking hand-in-hand with her husband, Jotirao Phule, waged a battle with society that was against educating girls, especially those of the marginalized. The couple recognized that education was important if the exploited people were to throw off the chains of bondage.

Revolutionaries were thrown up by the exploitative system of Brahminism who countered it and mobilized movements against it. These included spiritual leaders like Narayan Guru of Kerala, socialist leader Ram Manohar Lohia and the iconic B.R. Ambedkar.

Brahminism is so deeply entrenched in Indian society that it continues to hold its sway even in the 21st century monopolizing every social, governmental, financial, academic and policy-making institution. Yet, protest continues, guided by thinkers, their thought, ideology and actions.



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# 1

## THE BACKWARD GOD

### Gautama Buddha's liberative agenda for the Shudra/OBCs

*Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd*

The Shudras of India, a vast section of whom are known as the Other Backward Classes (OBCs), had not acquired an identity of their own until recently. For a long time in Indian history, they did not search for socio-political thinkers that helped them to change their lives. During the freedom movement, the nationalist leaders identified their heroes based on their understanding of history and Hindu mythology. Quite ironically, most of them traced their national identity or cultural and political greatness *vis-à-vis* the history of colonial rulers to kings who ruled parts of the Indian subcontinent, or alternatively, chose mythological characters from Ramayana or Mahabharata as their heroes. Some Brahmin writers invoked the names of Chanakya (Kautilya) and Manu as their ancestral thinkers. Only Dr B. R. Ambedkar examined the relationship of Gautama Buddha and the Dalit (Untouchables) of India.

Some Shudra/OBC caste leaders owned the heritage of Satavahanas in Andhra Pradesh, or Kakatiyas, and some (Yadavs all over India) owned the heritage of Srikrishna, the mythological hero of Mahabharata. We can see many such attempts of different caste communities owning the heritage of kings who ruled that linguistic region<sup>1</sup> (Ilaiah 2000). But the Shudra/OBCs have never seen the relationship between their transformation and Gautama Buddha as a thinker and Buddhism as a school of thought.

There are two ways in which the historically exploited and oppressed communities become empowered: 1) by systematically presenting their contribution in production, artisanal activity and economy, and 2) by tracing their heritage to great socio-economic and political thinkers and prophets who have changed the course of the world. The Dalit-Bahujan and OBC writers did not realize this basic historic fact in relocating themselves in Indian history. The ownership of mythological figures, kings and the heritage of certain kingdoms would not empower the community and leadership of a given movement because there is hardly any argument that could be built around their life that can empower the community that claims that ownership. If they anchor on their productive skills, the history of that productive activity in relation to the present status of the community, the community's claim over resources in the state structure and in power structures will acquire a definite legitimacy.

In addition to such claims around their contribution to nation-building if they reposition their ideological understanding owning the tradition, culture and theoretical postulates of liberation of such thinkers and reformers, then their claims, arguments and the very understanding

of the community would change quite significantly<sup>2</sup> (Government of Maharashtra 1987). For example, if a community anchors on the mythological status and role of Rama or Krishna, no social reform based on their anchoring is possible as these figures have no teachings that suggest social reform. Instead, if an oppressed community anchors on Gautama Buddha's teachings, on the institutional systems (O'Brien 2014) that he built and on the moral codes that he evolved, it would help such a community to reposition itself in the present context and even fight against discrimination and empower itself. In order to fight caste-based discrimination, the oppressed communities/castes must necessarily own the historical legacy of persons who built a casteless society and institutions. In my view, the OBCs must turn to Buddha to relocate their position in society and empower themselves.

Gautama Buddha was born in a tribal chieftain family called Sankhya. He became an alternative god for people who were opposing the Varna system in ancient India, and thus undermined the divine images of Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva and of course, Rama and Krishna. By the 21st century, Buddha had become a spiritual beacon with a following of about 7.5 percent of the global population. Thus, Buddha is the largest known and most revered Indian in human history. His devotees outnumber the devotees of any Hindu mythological god.

Buddha revolted against caste culture and institutions and established a Sangha as an alternative to the caste-based social system that existed then. However, today, most of his followers are outside India, particularly in Southeast Asia because Buddhism was driven out of India around medieval and early modern times by the Brahminical forces.

One of the reasons that it was driven out of India is that it posed a challenge to the Brahminical social order. Though Buddhism adopted the caste-free Sangha system it could not influence the society outside its fold. The Hindu caste system became more energetic after Adi Sankara's anti-Buddhist campaigns in the eighth and ninth centuries AD. Although Buddhism as a religion does not occupy much social space in India today, the Buddhist Sangha model serves as a utopian possibility (Krishnan 1986).

One of the many reasons that Gautama Buddha renounced the throne was that he had to perform the ritual of animal sacrifice and assume the status of Kshatriya, a caste (Varna) that was/is next to Brahmins. He seemed to have realized that Indian society was becoming fragmented with more and more caste divisions. The Brahminic forces composed the Rig Veda with a preamble that Brahma (the Creator), created Brahmins from his head, Kshatriyas from his shoulders, Vaishyas from his thighs and the Shudras from his feet. Today's OBCs are the same Shudras, with minor changes in the status of their socio-economic life, who were said to have been born from the feet of Brahma and hence were assigned the lowest position in the social order. But there is no change in their spiritual status. In any religious society, the social status of people depends on their spiritual status. In the Hindu religion the OBC social status is the same as that of Shudras in ancient and medieval times. Even today the OBCs cannot take up the job of a Hindu priest. They cannot head any Hindu religious institution such as Mutts. They cannot perform the rituals of worship in temples or for the Brahmins and other higher castes. The frozen hierarchical system of Varna and castes was firmly in place with rigid implementation of Varna/caste theory by the time Buddha started establishing Sanghas. Under the Varna system, kings were subordinate to the Brahmin priests. The Brahmins' disassociation from the productive processes and work was a reality by then.

As a revolt against the caste-centric Hindu social system, Buddha established Sanghas that were caste-free and were open to all irrespective of Varna or gender provided he/she agreed to abide by the Sangha rules. The Sangha rules did not recognize the caste-based divides as that would go against the *Vinaya* and *Nirvana* principles that were the core of Buddha's thought. Those core principles were inscribed in his Eight-Fold Path—Right Views, Right Aspirations,

Right Speech, Right Conduct, Right Means of Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindedness and Right Rapture.

From the very beginning, Buddha ignored the caste law by admitting Upali, a barber by birth, into the Sangha. Upali subsequently rose to become one of the Sangha's leading members. He asked Buddha if a person of "low birth" such as he could join the order. Buddha ordained him before the princes and asked the princes to pay homage to Upali, who by then had become an Arhant. An Arhant is a Bhikku, who takes full membership and works full time for the Sangha system. He became the chief disciple of Buddha who knew the rules of the order and was the foremost disciple in practicing Buddha's precepts. Barbara O'Brien writes:

The Shudras were consigned to being servants and laborers. They were not permitted to be educated. However, a Shudra could learn a skill, and Upali chose to learn to be a barber. His skill as a barber earned the patronage of the princes of the Shakya clan in Kapilavastu, where Prince Siddhartha had lived before he became the Buddha.

(Krishnan 1986)

One day, about three years after his enlightenment, Buddha returned home to Kapilavastu. He needed a haircut. Upali was summoned to the palace. Upali received his first teaching in meditation as he cut Buddha's hair. It is said that Upali quickly mastered the four *dhyanas*. At the end of Buddha's stay in Kapilavastu, several of the princes who were Buddha's kinsmen decided to follow him and become monks. Upon hearing this, Upali shed tears. A prince named Aniruddha, who would go on to become a great disciple of Buddha, took note of Upali's sorrow. Aniruddha spread out a blanket and asked the princes to leave their gold and jewels on the blanket for Upali as a final reward for his good service. And then the princes left. Upali took the blanket full of treasure and started to walk home. After a while, he stopped. If the princes of Kapilavastu could leave all their possessions to become disciples of Buddha, why couldn't he? He left the blanket hanging on a tree and began his search to find Buddha.

As he walked, however, he began to have doubts. Would Buddha accept a lowly person as himself as a disciple? Upali sat down by the road and wept in despair at the thought of Buddha not accepting him as a disciple. Another of Buddha's disciples, Sariputra, found Upali weeping and asked him what was wrong. Upali asked if a low-caste Shudra like him could be accepted as a disciple and enter the order alongside the sons of kings and Brahmins. Certainly, Sariputra replied. Anyone who can keep the *Precepts* can be a disciple of Buddha. Sariputra and Upali walked together to find Buddha.

The Shakya princes were still waiting to greet Buddha when Upali joined them. The princes and their barber were taken to Buddha. All of them bowed at his feet. Buddha asked Upali to come forward. The Buddha enquired about the conscious decision to join the Sangha system. Upali agreed to all the principles that Buddha informed him about. Buddha knew that he came from a barber background. Buddha told Upali that in the Sangha, caste or former occupation did not matter. The only rank that mattered was seniority. And then he asked Upali to receive the ordination. Then Buddha ordained the astonished Upali, right there before ordaining the Shakya princes, meaning that Upali was now their senior and was due obeisance from them. Buddha told the princes that to give up the material world they would also have to give up social distinctions and privileges.

Upali expressed his gratitude by learning and keeping the *Precepts*. As might be expected, the "rules guy" was not always popular with other monks and nuns. On one occasion, word got back to Buddha that Upali had been treated disrespectfully by other members of the order. So, Buddha gathered the monks and nuns and lectured them on the importance of the *Precepts*.

As time went on, respect for Upali grew in the order. And when the Buddha passed, Upali was needed more than ever. The disciple Mahakasyapa was leading a number of monks to Kushinagara when news of the Buddha's death reached him. The news caused some monks to grieve, but one monk said he was glad to be able to do as he wished. Mahakasyapa was disturbed by this remark and worried for the future of the Sangha and the Buddha's teachings. So, he convened a great assembly of senior monks, all Arhants, to consider how to preserve the teachings and the order.

It was at this assembly that the disciple Ananda recited all of the Buddha's sermons from memory. And then Upali was asked to recite the monastic rules. The assembled monks agreed that the recitations were accurate. These recitations became the basis for the *Sutta-pitika* and the *Vinaya-pitika* of the *Pali Tipitika*, which are the main sacred texts of Buddhism. Other versions of the Vinaya were preserved in other language traditions as well. The practice of the humble barber Upali sustains the monastic Sangha to this day.

The admission of Upali was the first-ever breaking of the caste rule in the Hindu caste system. Barbers even now belong to a very low social order within the spiritual and social system in Indian states and civil society. It appears that by the Buddha's own accord he does not belong to the Kshatriya caste but belongs to "Suryavamsi by gotra and Sakya jati" (O'Brien 2014); the Buddha tried to keep away from being co-opted into Kshatriyahood because once he got co-opted into Kshatriyahood he would not be able to establish a caste-free Sangha. If he were to accept that he was a Kshatriya, he would have been forced to operate within the caste system. The caste system is a vicious one. Once one accepts its rules it would encircle the whole life process. Hence, the Buddha realized the danger and did not get into its fold. But he knew that it was operative in the whole of the society outside the Sangha.

Not only Upali but several Shudra men and women were admitted into the Sangha system and were given leadership roles. Among women, there were some prominent figures who joined the Sangha system to escape patriarchal and caste-oppressive Vedic society. Among them were Amrapali, Sumangala and so on. As is well known, Amrapali was a well-known *granika* (prostitute) and was exploited by the privileged people who used her body but did not give her any respect or treat her as a human being. Finally, she joined the Sangha system. It was said that the Buddha gave respect and when she was initiated into the Sangha, he stood up to greet her.

The story of Sumangala, who was from the weavers' community, is worth recalling. Sumangala's song in *Therigatha* (the written text of songs sung by women in Indian history) tells her story quite clearly. This song, composed by Sumangala is an autobiographical narrative:

O Women well set free! How free I am  
How wonderfully free from kitchen drudgery,  
Free from the harsh grip of hunger,  
And free from empty cooking pots,  
Free too of that unscrupulous man,  
The weaver of sunshades.  
Calm now and serene I am,  
All lust and hatred purged.  
To the shades of the spreading tree I go  
And contemplate my happiness.

Sumangala was being harassed by her husband, having been influenced by patriarchal Vedic thought. She left the family life and joined the Sangha to liberate herself. The above *gatha* portrays her feeling of liberation. In fact, most of the women who joined the Sanghas were Shudras.

The situation of Brahmin women in those days was much worse. The Shudra women could join the Sangha system and could challenge their husband's authority because they too were working women, and their labor power played a significant role in their families.

The Buddha had realized that the caste system had fragmented Indian society. The Shudras were, as a social mass, reduced to slave status. In the Vedic spiritual system, they were being treated as chattels. By then, all over the world the slave system had been institutionalized. Slave struggles had also begun by the sixth and fifth centuries BC. The Buddhist alternative emerged in that context of turmoil. All the tribal masses that were settling down on the plains were characterized as Shudras by the Veda pundits. With the Kshatriya kings obeying the Veda pundits who had become experts in all kinds of deceptive methods, they had even the rulers under their spell. They were even telling the rulers where to start a war, where to build a house and so on. In fact, the belief in *Vaasthu* and *Muhurtham*, that is the auspicious lay of the land/house and auspicious time, respectively, which is a deception to which the OBCs fall victim and lose money, was also prevalent in those days. The Buddhists rejected such superstitious practices as unwanted and deceptive.

Considering that even the most educated persons in the Hindu system are in the grip of the Brahmin priests even in the 21st century, the control of the Brahmins in those days would have been far worse. The Buddha, being a tribal leader himself, seems to have sympathized with the Shudras. However, no such sympathies can be found with the Hindu mythological heroes like Rama and Krishna. For example, Krishna tells Arjuna that he should fight in the war, whatever its result, because he was a Kshatriya. Krishna says

Considering your specific duty as a Kshatriya, you should know that there is no better engagement for you than fighting on religious principles; and so, there is no need for hesitation. Happy are the Kshatriyas to whom such fighting opportunities come unsought, opening for them the doors of the heavenly planets.

(*Bhagavad Gita, Chapter 2, Verses 31 and 32*)

Krishna and Rama, even in the mythological story narratives, did not support human equality. Since they were epic heroes hardly any discussion is available around them about the idea of human equality. In fact, the whole Brahminic literature, ancient or modern, including that of the present Hindutva school, is silent about the question of human equality in spiritual and social domains. The idea of God creating human beings equal does appear in any major Hindu or Hindutva literary text. Krishna and Rama undertook the role of supporting the Brahminic atrocities against the Shudras, Chandals and Adivasis. Gautama Buddha did not allow any such discourses in the Sanghas. This is why the modern-day OBCs should look to the Buddha for ideological support and empowerment. The ownership of mythological Hindu godheads would not help them socially and historically. Historically, the Buddhists, even after the death of Gautama Buddha, supported the *shramana* culture, which essentially was a Shudra-Chandala culture. The Shudra and Chandala cultures historically were productive cultures, whereas the Brahminic culture was an anti-production-consumerist culture. The culture of cultivation called "agriculture" was promoted by Shudras and Chandalas. Pots were made by them, bricks were made by them, houses were built by them. The Veda pundits only enjoyed the fruits of Shudra-Chandala labor. The Veda pundits encouraged wars and promoted superstition. They worked out theories for the oppression of women. All through Indian civilization, the Shudras remained progressive and productive. After Buddhism became established as a religion, some Shudras joined Buddhism. But most of them continued to practice the culture of production which is nothing but *shramana* culture in Buddhist language.

The OBCs as a social group never engaged themselves in writing their own history or wrote about their role in history. The Shudras of India are the earliest *mool nivasis*, that is, early natives of this nation. The Harappan (Indus Valley) civilization was built mainly by them. At that time there was no Shudra–Chandala division among them. They were mostly Dravidian by race and autochthonous by existence. With Aryan invasion their history has been erased. Since the Buddha was a non-Aryan Sankhya tribal man he saw the negative role of Aryan invaders and decided to establish a Sangha system that encompassed both Dravidians and Aryans.

Against this historical development, Hindu mythological cultural heritage is drawn from Aryan hegemonic heritage. Though that heritage is shown to be most ancient, now we have enough literature to show that the pre-Aryan Harappan agrarian civilization represents Shudra/OBC cultural history much more authentically, with similar technological tools like brick making, house construction, canal digging and so on being almost common. There was no inclusiveness in the Aryan/Brahminic story narratives as they believed and practiced very strong caste segregation. Since the Shudra/OBC social masses were not allowed to produce scholars from their social womb, they could not examine their relationship to the Buddhist ethic; they still follow the mythological heroes who did not allow them to come alive intellectually. If they had been, the Shudra-slave status that was imposed on them could have been changed by following an altogether different spiritual system that allowed them to grow in the society and state structures based on their individual abilities. Hinduism as a religion stood against individualism. Buddhism, on the contrary, ensured that individual rights prevailed since the earliest period of human association formation. This is the fundamental difference between Buddhism and Hinduism.

### **Contemporary life**

Even if we examine contemporary lifestyles and work ethics, the Shudra/OBCs live a life of labor whereas the Brahmins, Baniyas and Kshatriyas live outside the realm of productive work and live a life of leisure. Today, the Shudra/OBCs are not being allowed to share state power, not being allowed to own major businesses and have no share in running higher educational institutions. Mainly, they work in the artisanal realms and in the productive fields, producing all the essential commodities through their labor. The historical connectivity between Buddhism and the present productive communities (mainly Shudra/OBCs) is that the Buddha himself stopped the mass killing of animals in Yagnas, a system introduced by the Aryan Brahmin forces, and saw to it that animal power, particularly bull power, was deployed in agrarian production.

Cultivation was taken up by the Buddhist Viharas and by the Bhikkus-Bhikunis. It is a known fact that a major agrarian revolution was introduced by the Sangha system and King Ashoka advanced that revolution further. There is no evidence shown in any Buddhist text that they were pure vegetarians. Since Gautham Buddha himself was said to have died of meat food poisoning such a projection does not make any sense. In all the Buddhist countries like China, Sri Lanka, Japan, Taiwan, Tibet, Bhutan and so on, the choice of food is huge. None of these countries follows a vegetarian food culture. But in the state of Gujarat, where the influence of Jainism is dominant, even the Shudras like Patels, Ghasis and so on, became vegetarian.

Wherever the influence of Hindu Brahmins and Baniyas is high, as in South India, the people have become vegetarian; they are trying to convert even the OBCs to vegetarianism. In ancient times, the Buddha followed the middle path—which was in between the violent Aryan Brahminism and the totally non-violent Jainism. The Middle Path became the Buddhist way whether of Hinayana or of Mahayana, Thervada or Navayana Buddhism. The OBCs must learn a lot from Buddhist world and shape and re-shape their future. Hinduism has been a violent reli-

gion mainly using that violence against the Dalits, OBCs and Tribals. The historical victims of Hindu violence were mainly the native people themselves. For example, the Hindutva violence in our contemporary period was against minority religions—Muslims and Christians, but the violence against Dalit-Bahujans has been going on for millennia. Even now there are no equal rights within the domain of religion.

There is yet another area where the OBCs must learn from Buddhism and the monotheist religions of the world. As of now, the OBCs are the single largest multi-idol worshipping social force in the world. Though quite a lot of them were living on the plains in the Harappan civilization itself from ancient times to the present day they did not move out of the localized idol-worshipping culture, which in itself is not a religious culture but a primitivist superstitious spiritual culture. Idol worshipping is not part of religious philosophy. Idol worship is a pre-religious spiritual practice which involves a lot of superstitious practices. Several African nations, which followed idol-worshipping primitive cultures until recently, moved into universal religions like Christianity and Islam. Buddhism was the first universal religion that moved out of multi-idol worship culture and took to one-idol worship, that is, of the Buddha. While the OBCs do not relate to Buddhist culture the Dalits do, considering that one of the main arguments of Ambedkar was that the Hindu Brahmins declared all Buddhists as untouchable, and therefore, in effect, equating all Dalits with Buddhists.

The Buddhist nations developed a scientific temper quite early. The tribal communities that adopted such a scientific temper were liberated from superstition and idol worship. But the OBCs of India are still rooted in their own primitive and localized cultural domains. Their pluralities are under developed. A civilizational strength has not grown within them. Even the Hindu Brahminic forces, whom the OBCs follow, evolved kind of pan-Indian spiritual icons around Shaivism and Vaishnavism. The OBCs are not aware that the religious practices that they have adopted oppress them. They continue to follow those practices, while at the same time they also worship their own caste-based village gods and goddesses. The Brahminical practices that have been adopted by the OBCs, have no book-based authenticity or spiritual rationalism.

Gautama Buddha wanted the Shudras to get out of the trap of such practices. The well-known Shudras (OBCs) of those times like Upali, Amrapali, Sumangala and so on, who adopted the Sangha system, acquired pan-Indian social and cultural status. Somewhere along the history, a disjunction between the Shudra/OBCs and Buddhism took place that caused such damage that it confined these communities to backwardness for several centuries. Brahminism exploits that backwardness even today.

The OBCs must look at their own inner strength of being productive. Civilizations emerge out of productive practices and cultures of people and the OBCs have this huge resource. If they want to assert their own history, culture and civilization, they should educate themselves more in global ideological systems too. Creativity is hardly fostered among people if they get stuck in primitivism and superstition. Neither does mythology help them. What can help the OBCs is their history of production and egalitarian distribution, which is starkly different from that of the Brahmins and Baniyas.

## Notes

1 The Kummaras, as the pot-makers are known in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, claim that Shatavahanas, who were the ancient Andhra rulers, belonged to their caste community. The Gollas or Yadavas of India claim that Srikrishna is their ancestral ruler and also god. The Kummaras call themselves Shalivahanas and Yadavas call themselves Yaduvamshis. Almost every OBC caste has its own claim on some historical or mythological figure. This kind of subjective claim did not lead to enhancing their social status, nor did it lead to homogenizing the productive communities. The OBCs are by and large multi-idol

worshipping communities that follow the Brahminic superstitions without advancing their social and historical consciousness. The primitive idol worship of their own caste failed to establish linkages with other castes. They believe in fragmenting rather than unifying the castes and communities. Ever since Ambedkar embraced Buddhism the Dalits started claiming that Buddhism was/is their ancestral religion. That gave them a historical anchoring and global identity. So far, none of the OBC intellectuals have examined their relationship to the Buddha as a thinker and Buddhism as religion.

- 2 Historically backward communities advanced only when they located themselves in history and production and not in mythology. While it is true that the Indian Brahmins who controlled scholarship understood the role of history quite late, it is also true that the OBCs have not yet realized the importance of locating themselves in the history of India. If they keep accepting the Brahminic construction that all OBCs are Hindus, then naturally the Brahmin supremacy will continue.

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# 2

## CONTESTING CASTE

### The revolutionary movement of the sant-poets

*Braj Ranjan Mani*

The Bhakti movement, under which rubric comes a radical stream of socio-religious activities, peaked in the 15th and 16th centuries in the north of India with the emergence of a remarkable line of subaltern *sant kavi* (sant-poets) such as Kabir, Ravidas and Dadu. Starting in the south in the latter half of the first millennium, gradually spreading northward through Karnataka and Maharashtra and engulfing north India and Bengal (in the east) from the 14th century onwards, the Bhakti movement, contrary to the elitist mythography, was clearly divided into two streams—Brahmanic and anti-Brahmanic (Mani 2005, Omvedt 2008). Ranged against social and religious discrimination, the anti-caste radicalism of the movement was shaped and spearheaded by seditious artisans, cultivators and laborers who composed poetry of exquisite beauty in the people's languages. Their verses and activities represent “a whole climate of opinion” that challenged the tenets of caste-feudalism in a caste-feudal age. If the Bhakti movement was a *jan-andolan* (Dwivedi 1999) and a protest movement (Ranade 1961), it was due to the challenging egalitarian proposition of its anti-caste proponents. Their lowly social origin and their transgressive, and often iconoclastic attitude, reflected in Kabir's immortal phrase *anabhai sancha* (the fearless truth, the whole truth), is a striking feature of the movement. Their emphasis on spiritual and social equality was emblematic of their emancipatory vision and struggle. They used religious idioms but shaped the terms of the debate in a secular context. Though religious in style, the cut and thrust of the debate they generated was political. Most of them took recourse to free thinking, rationalism and a radical humanism, instead of pedantic parroting to drive home their point. Though the original works of the subaltern sant-poets were later tampered with and appropriated by the caste elites to fit them in the conformist subservience, even partial recovery of their authentic verses in some impartial scholarship (Tiwari 1961, Vaudeville 1993, Hess and Singh 1986, Dharwadker 2003, Hawley and Juergensmeyer 1988, Singh 2003) shows that the Bhakti movement represented a cultural revolt marked by riveting examples of ordinary people's extraordinary creativity.

This study of Kabir and other radical sant-poets of the north, like any other study, is based on a particular perspective, with a practical framework, which can be stated in the following way: Privilege and discrimination, inherent in a hierarchical society, inevitably leads to social conflict which destroys the possibility of community consensus and cooperation. The assigned status of high and low, and unfair distribution of material and cultural resources, remain unacceptable to the devalued and the deprived. Conflict runs deep in a caste-and-class-divided society and finds

expression in both social and psychological realms. Such antagonism leads to the emergence of at least two distinct ideologies. As Turner (1983, p. 78), following Marx, argues, “Each mode of production will give rise to at least two significantly separate ideologies corresponding to the class position of subordinate and super-ordinate classes.” In other words, dominant ideology always remains a field of contention and struggle. Even in the case of hegemony, or manufactured consent, it is never fully accepted by the subjugated. Their human spirit is never crushed permanently, and their overt or covert protest against injustice marks the rhythm of history. Injustices are thus continuously, and variously, interrogated, dissented and contested, keeping alive the cycle of the *subordination-exploitation-protest* continuum that carries the hope of a revolutionary turnaround (Gramsci 1996).

Extending this Gramscian insight to the realm of culture, Hall (1996) re-situates ideology in a far more strategic relation to culture itself. Hegemony for Gramsci is a “process by which a historical bloc of social forces is constructed and the ascendancy of that bloc secured.” Taking this forward, Hall sees culture as a “critical site of social action and intervention, where power relations are both established and potentially unsettled.” He defines ideology as “the *mental frameworks*—the languages, the concepts, categories, imagery of thought, and the systems of representation—which different classes or social groups in order to make sense of, define, figure out and render intelligible, the way society works” (Hall 1996, p. 26). In this visualization, far from being an aspect of culture, ideology is a means through which culture is constantly defined. Thus, culture is not constant but a site of contest, making the understanding of past and present a contested territory. We will see the anti-caste, anti-Brahmanic orientation of the Bhakti movement in this open-ended and discursive framework, with the assumption that any movement or ideology can be analyzed, to use the famous words of Chomsky (1998), with “a bit of open-mindedness, normal intelligence and healthy scepticism.”

Before delineating the core characteristics of the movement, it may be in order to dispel the ambiguities that surround the word “Bhakti.” In Hindi and other local languages, *bhakti* means loving devotion to God or some other appropriate object of worship. But its practice, discourse and theology are not uniform. *Bhakti* varies greatly but major fault lines appear along *saguna* (with attributes) and *nirguna* (without attributes). *Saguna bhakti* means imagining and worshipping God with qualities and attributes, such as Rama and Krishna; *Nirguna* means that the divine can only be visualized or realized in a formless and flawless spirit. “*Nirguna*” implies radical monotheism, and a rejection of canons, rituals and institutions of organized religions. The Bhakti of sant-poets like Kabir was of such “*nirguna*” orientation, and its rationale can be broadly understood in the following way: The world is embroiled in man-made illusions and trappings which make human life miserable. Goodness and evil, truth and falsehood, appearance and reality are not clear-cut, but enmeshed with each other. Evil is powerful, and, in fact, rules over the world because evil, unlike goodness, is easy to perpetrate. To conquer this darkness, we need to bring out our best, for which we need the intervention of God to show us the truthful way. Access to God is possible through *bhakti*, but even that contains the danger of false *bhakti* of the *saguna* variety whose very conception of God is false. As its very gods (and theories based on them) are false, its acceptance and practice are worthless. The traditional ways of established religions are worthless. Veda and Koran, in Kabir’s vivid words, are “traps laid for poor souls to tumble in.” And so are the legends of Rama and Krishna, the rules of caste and clan, of purity and pollution, of endogamy and social segregation. All these means are misleading, unable to establish a connection with God. The only way is true *bhakti* to divinity, which is immanent, not transcendental. That God exists in every heart—though most of us are not aware of this transformative divinity within ourselves—is the common refrain of *nirguna* proponents.

But finding the god within, which the sants term *Satguru* (the true master who dispels the darkness of life), is difficult because it necessitates cutting through the entire web of ignorance, illusions and lies that surround us. The custodians of religion and society, the sants underline in one way or another, have created such deception and lies on purpose to ensnare and enslave the people, and it is necessary to see and reject the false and the fake in their totality. According to Kabir, he says such is the state of society that every aspect of knowledge such as learning, reading, speech and the ancient books of Vedas are all corrupted with falsehood and ignorance.

Kabir is very emphatic that without removing false knowledge, we cannot find true knowledge—and the light within. For this, sants like him take recourse to *sahaj samadhi* (accessible meditation which requires no mediation of the priests and the texts of the organized religions) and *parakh-pad*, which means testing empirical knowledge acquired through experience by one's intellect and rational thinking. Such *sadhana* and *parakh-pad* will lead to *anabhai sancha* (fearless truth) and *suchchham veda* (critical knowledge).

This is a call to use one's experience, observation, and intellect to see the things as they are, not as they are said be in the Veda-Purana or Koran. Kabir's stress on the rejection of all received education makes eminent sense in a social context where education is a caste privilege, where the lowered castes are denied access to *shastras* (canons). Obviously, the contents of such canons are bound to be caste-oriented, and nothing can be more corrupt than such theology and epistemology. Kabir rejects the entire Brahmanic literature on this basis. He accepts only *aakhin ki dekhi* (one's own observation) and rejects *kaagad ki lekhi* (fabricated knowledge). If this analysis is correct, then it means the sant-poets were rationalist and realist, not mystic and escapist. It was their *parakh-pad* and *anabhai sancha* that became their ultimate weaponry through which they declared war on caste, Brahmanism and other forms of injustice. As Dharwadker (2003) points out, the sants were not mere spiritualists but also social and psychological realists whose religiosity and metaphysics led straight to moral philosophy, social criticism and radical politics. To attack metapsychology and metaphysics of Brahmanism, they developed counter-knowledge and counter-metaphysics. For this, they developed both symbols (for its dramatic force) and concepts (for its analytical edge). As we shall see shortly, their *bhakti* for *mukti* (liberation) was not confined to the realm of religion. Kabir's dream of a *be-gham desh* (a country without sorrow) and Ravidas's *be-gham pura* (a city without sorrow) thus represented not just a utopia but also an ideology. Their proposition of accessibility of God and salvation to everyone passes through a social and secular process and necessarily involves subversive egalitarianism. When everybody is somebody, then nobody is "low caste" or "untouchable." It was precisely this radical and secular aspect that made the Bhakti movement a social movement. And, in this sense, the Bhakti movement was a Mukti movement, that is a liberation movement.

### **Rebellion against caste and Brahmanism**

The Bhakti movement stretched unevenly and differed widely on account of regional variations and individual sensibilities of its participants, but opposition to caste and Brahmanism remained its common and foremost target. As its leaders aspired for inclusive reconstruction, they were not averse to useful resources from "folk Hinduism" and Islamic Sufism. This does not mean they were mere reconcilers between the traditional Hinduism and Islam, as many elitist scholars underline. If we read them closely and place them in their historical context, they wanted to dismantle all hierarchical fundamentals of religion and society. Of course, there were contradictions and differences among them, as they were plural and thinking individuals, but they were far from disengaged "mystical," "individualist" or merely religious, as Brahmanic scholars stereotype them. After all, their religiosity did not hinder them from their critical social thinking, which can

be seen in their strong non-conformity and rejection of not only ritualism but also the underlying ideologies of institutionalized religions.

Though this chapter is confined to the movement in the north, it must be noted that the sant-poets across India shared a striking similarity on the anti-caste orientation. Among them we can count the outcaste Brahman Basava, the leather worker Haralayya, the proto-feminist Akka Mahadevi in Karnataka, the tailor Namdev, the village servant Chokhamela, the grocer Tuka, the vegetable-grower Savata Mali in Maharashtra, the weaver Kabir, the cobbler Ravidas, the cotton-corder Dadu Dayal, the rebellious princess Mira, the Khatri Nanak, the potter Gora and the barber Sena in the north. Though Tamil Sittars or Siddhas such as Sivavakkiyar and Pambatti Sittar who sang subversive songs are not traditionally known to belong to the Bhakti movement, they shared their social radicalism with the likes of Kabir, Ravidas and Tuka, and as such can be seen as an integral part of this movement (Mani 2005, pp. 134–87).

The subaltern stream of the movement replaced the deadwood of rites and rituals with a fresh conception of religion and God. As a supreme symbol of compassion and justice, the God of subaltern sant-poets stood on the side of the oppressed and the devalued. In fact, their God was not transcendental but existed within their own beings in the form of individual and social conscience. *Look within to realize God and decide what is right and wrong for you and others* seemed to be their common refrain. This God was revered not for maintaining the social hierarchy but for opposing it and gracing everyone who led a virtuous life, irrespective of caste and status. So much so that when the God did not live up to these expectations, the sant-poets were not afraid to question even him! Ultimately, God, or religion for that matter, they would argue, was for the devotee. Kabir, the most charismatic leader of the movement, would say that there was no duality between God and devotee because both of them, by entering into a holy alliance, had become one.

The sant-poets, thus, clothed their rebellion against injustice as obedience to God. Kabir says, whoever uses force commits a crime (*Kabira jor kia so juluma hai*), and God will punish him severely. Their devotion was to a God who stirred up rebellion in the hearts of devotees. This God begged the faithful to free him from the idolatrous—and ignominious—fetters of a pseudo-religion founded and jealously guarded by the pundits and maulvis. In their alliance, the God and the devotee were determined to rescue society from the clutches of corrupt elements. In other words, the sant-poets' striving for a true religion was not an end in itself but a means to bolster inclusive values and a just society. This becomes clear from the way they brought into play monotheistic radicalism to engineer a revolution.

It is striking that the sant-poets did not invoke detachment from worldly life as a prerequisite for salvation. They rejected renunciation, asceticism, and celibacy as the necessary means of enlightenment. In a famous poem, Kabir poked fun at the yogi who in his quest of heaven tonsures his head, takes a vow of celibacy and shuns worldly life (Hawley and Juergensmeyer 1988, p. 50). Most of the sant-poets were married and did some work to earn their living—Kabir did weaving and Ravidas worked with leather. Unlike the Brahman, they accorded dignity to labor, and invested it with social service and spiritual value. Guru Nanak, who laid the foundation of a new religion, exhorted the religiously inclined to seek God “in the fields, in the weaver’s shop, and in the happy home” instead of the temple or the mosque.

Moreover, the sant-poets stressed the need to democratize language and culture. They composed poetry of exquisite excellence in a composite colloquial language, which came to be known as *Saddhukari*. Kabir targeted the so-called “sacred” language, saying “Sanskrit is like *koop-jal* (stagnant pool of water), and *bhasha* (the people’s language) the *bahata nir* (the fresh water of the brook).” This was, by and large, the stand taken by all of them. They wrote in the people’s language and poked fun at Sanskrit. They asked, “If Sanskrit is *devabhasha* (the language of gods),

is the *janabhasha* (the people's language) the language of beasts?" This led to an efflorescence of literary and intellectual creativity in regional languages that was fresh, authentic and imbued with people's sentiments. The result was that Sanskrit lost its dominance, and even top Brahman authors such as Surdas and Tulsidas were forced to write in local languages.

In a dramatic development, the cultural focus shifted from the pandits well-versed in *karma-kanda* and Sanskrit scripture to those who composed verses in vernaculars and debated socio-spiritual issues with the people. With the incendiary slogan of *jaat-paat poochhe nahi koi, hari ka bhaje so hari ka hoi* (don't ask about caste; if you love God you belong to God), those who attacked caste as fundamentally wrong and inhuman announced their arrival on the scene. Energized by fresh leadership and new ideas, the Bhakti unleashed a campaign for socio-cultural change. Writing in 1900 (even though from a Brahmanic perspective), M. G. Ranade saw the Bhakti upsurge as a rebellion against Brahmanic dominance and compared it (in significance) with Europe's Protestant movement against papism.

Like the Protestant Reformation in Europe in the sixteenth century, there was a Religious, Social and Literary Revival and Reformation in India. This ... was not Brahmanical in its orthodoxy, it was heterodox in its spirit of protest against forms and ceremonies and class distinctions based on birth, and ethical in its preference of a pure heart, and of the law of love, to all other acquired merits and good works. This was the work of the people, of the masses, and not of the classes. At its head were Saints and Prophets, Poets and Philosophers, who sprang chiefly from the lower orders of society—tailors, carpenters, potters, gardeners, shop-keepers, barbers, and even mahars.

(Ranade 1961, p. 5)

The occasional Brahmins who joined the movement—a Ramananda here, a Gyaneshwar there—had been influenced by the profound religiosity of the subaltern sant-poets and not the other way round, as is made out by the dominant historiography. The general backdrop of the movement in the north was the social chaos in the wake of the Muslim invasions and the economic hardship made worse by the caste-feudal tightening of socio-religious restrictions. Alongside an increasing feudalization of land and land-relations, there was a multiplication of gods and goddesses (paralleling the hierarchies in society), a proliferation of castes through a process of permutation involving all kinds of commensal and connubial prohibitions, and a growing insistence on purity-pollution rules. Such a sickening situation provoked people's protest and prompted a radical revaluation of prevalent values. The ferment thus generated, especially among the downtrodden, and threw up many cultural heroes, popularly recognized as sant-poets, whose belief in one-God-and-one-humanity inspired them to declare war on social inequality.

In the beginning of the second millennium, especially in the areas of Bengal and Bihar, the Buddhist ascetics called *Siddha* (accomplished masters), who were drawn mainly from the lower orders, expounded the Sahajyan, Tantrik and Nathpanthi ideas. The connection between the radical stream of Bhakti movement, led by Kabir, the first major sant-poet from the north, and the later forms of Buddhism such as Sahajyan and Nathpanth has been variously underlined by several scholars (Barthwal 1960, Dwivedi 1997, Chaturvedi 1954, Vaudeville 1993). The Bhakti leaders' attack on Brahmanism and scriptural authority was rooted in this tradition of the "Sahajiya" Buddhists and "Nath" Yogis who were popular in Bihar and eastern India. From the eighth or ninth century, the Siddhas and Yogis had been communicating their ideas in the common tongue, *bhasha*, which had developed from the western Apabhransha or old Bengali.

Despite ambiguities about many things about them, what is very clear is their militant non-conformism. Anyone, irrespective of caste, creed or sex, could be initiated into the Tantrik and Nathpanthi orders. There are instances of women from the category of “untouchables” being accepted as gurus.

Due to their subversive ideas and lifestyle, the Nath-Siddhas had to bear the brunt of Brahmanic-feudal wrath. The esoteric nature of their beliefs and the secretive manner in which they conducted their activities can be understood as a device to escape political persecution. Faced with increasing hostility, the Nathpanthis, under Gorakhnath’s charismatic leadership, tried to organize themselves in a well-knit community. Evidence suggests that they were able to set up their centers in different parts of northern and western India as well as the Deccan.

It was these or similar forces which provided favorable ambience for the Bhakti movement to take root in many parts of the country. On a broader historical canvas, the movement may be interpreted as a spontaneous opposition to the ascendancy of the priestly-feudal alliance in the wake of defeat and liquidation of Buddhism. The specter of Vedic-Brahmanic oppression, kept in check for a millennium by the Buddhist movement, was haunting the caste-oppressed. Bhakti was perhaps the subliminal attempt of the subalterns to offset the danger of a belligerent Brahmanism (reflected in writings and activities of Kumaril Bhatta and Adi Shankara who pulled out all the stops to revive the discriminating tenets of Vedic-Brahmanism). The reactionary revivalism was evident in the persecution of Buddhists and Jains, with almost all Buddhist shrines being forcefully converted into Hindu temples. By all indications, the Brahmanic revivalism was carried out in an organized and ruthless manner. This was also reflected in the Hinduisation of many tribes and the consequent growth of many new jatis or sub-castes. The new jatis and sub-castes had to be fitted into the existing structure by putting forward the theory of *varnasankar*, that is, the growth of mixed castes. The rise of image worship, which is often accompanied by superstitions, and the elaboration of a religion of works (*karma*) were other aspects of the religious ideas of the period. This socio-religious order was supported and buttressed by the Rajput-Brahman alliance. As a result, any effort to alter the established social order, in other words, the varna system, would not only have to face the opposition and hostility of the entrenched Brahman class, but also invite repression at the hands of political authority.

This may explain why, despite its early stirrings, the radical Bhakti in the north could not broaden its base to become a movement in the initial stage. The movement emerged in the south where Brahmins were fewer in number and the concordance between them and the feudal forces was still being forged. As the Kshatriya caste hardly existed in the south, it was easier for the Shudras and Ati-shudras to take on the Brahmins. But in the north, the movement did not take root until the arrival of Islam which somewhat slackened the vicious grip of the Brahman-Kshatriya combine over the masses.

As in the south and the Deccan, in the north too the movement transcended its religious confines and established itself as a platform for socio-cultural changes. Many factors were responsible for this development. First, the prestige and power of the Brahman was on the wane following the defeat of their feudal patrons and establishment of the Delhi Sultanate. Second, at about the same time, the movements of the Nathpanthi and Siddha openly challenging caste and Brahman supremacy had gained popularity among the masses. The third factor was the coalescence of Bhakti thought with Sufi ideas. The Sufis were popular and gaining ground in many parts of north India. Their concepts of equality and brotherhood echoed and invigorated the social vision of the movement.

### Sant Kabir

Kabir, the first major sant-poet to emerge in northern India after two centuries of Hindu-Muslim interaction, is the greatest figure of the movement in terms of his enduring influence. He is also the most controversial. In the absence of authentic documentation, his life, his activities and his poetry have been a *free-for-all* since his death, made worse by the dominant scholarship to appropriate him in the Brahmanic Hindu mold. Attempts and anxiety to prove that Kabir was actually a Brahman by birth, or at least was initiated into legitimate spiritual life by a Brahman guru, and that his teachings are nothing but a mystic or rustic version of the Veda-Purana still continue, but now there is a consensus among serious Kabir-scholars about his non-Brahman origin and the strongly anti-Brahmanic orientation of his thinking (Vaudeville 1993, Hess and Singh 1986, Dharwadker 2003). This is also the view of the earliest and remarkably unbiased portrayal of Kabir by Nabhdadas, alone among the early orthodox commentators who resisted the temptation to Brahmanize Kabir. This is what Nabhdadas writes in his *Bhaktamal* composed around the year 1600:

Kabir didn't honour the world's conventions, such as caste, the four stages of life, the six philosophical systems [of Brahmanism] .... He showed that yoga, ritual sacrifice, fasting and charity were trivial and base without the practice of devotional worship. His ramainis, shabdás, and sakhis are the truth about Hindus and Muslims. His words didn't belong to a faction: what he said was good for everybody. The world's disposition is inflexible: he didn't say things to please someone. Kabir didn't honour the world's conventions.

(Dharwadker 2003, p. 23, Vaudeville 1993, p. 43)

It was this outright rejection of caste and Brahmanism which prompted the pandits to mythologize, mystify and appropriate Kabir. As part of the design to misrepresent and co-opt Kabir came the hagiographical works of Anantdas who composed *Kabir Parachai* (c. 1625) and Priyadas who composed *Bhaktirasbodhini* (c. 1712). Both the fabricators belonged to the Ramanandi community, and they tried their best to make Kabir an abject follower of Ramananda, the Brahman and thus, absorb the former into the latter's conservative Vaishanav devotion. In their legends, Kabir was so desperate to become a follower of Ramananda that he resorted to a cheap ploy and "tricked" Ramananda to accept him as his disciple! He stretched himself across the stairs leading the Ganga in Banaras where Ramananda came for his bath in the pre-dawn darkness. As expected, Ramananda tripped over Kabir's body and cried out his mantra "Rama! Rama!" Kabir then claimed that the magical mantra had been transmitted to him, tricking the reluctant Ramananda into accepting him as a disciple.

In the Brahmanic narratives, Ramananda is credited to have brought the Bhakti to the people of all castes in the north. He is presented as the guru of all the non-Brahman sant-poets such as Ravidas, Sadhana, Dhana, Sena, Pipa and of course, Kabir. It was this outstanding line of sant-poets that spearheaded the Bhakti movement in the north, and, thus, Ramananda—by virtue of being their mentor—was accorded the status of the father-figure of the movement in the region. This myth was fabricated to show the Brahmanic liberalism which actually amounted to draining those sant-poets of any radical fervor, and then presenting them, with conveniently

erasing, editing, re-composing their texts, either as self-contradictory mystics or faithful followers of the Veda–Purana.

The Ramananda story is untenable, first of all, on chronological grounds. Those sant-poets appeared in different times, and it was not possible for Ramananda to have had all the disciples attributed to him. Second, there is no mention of Ramananda in the available utterances of his so-called “disciples.” Third, and most important, there is hardly any affinity or similarity between the radical nirguna sant-poets and the saguna sanatani Ramananda, as we shall see soon. After all, why would a rebel like Kabir, who had nothing but contempt for the Brahmanic religion, “trick” a shastric Brahman into accepting him as a disciple? This fabrication was clearly an instrument of containment, mythologizing Kabir in a way as to wipe out his anti-caste radicalism. This is a case of forgery, and an instance of co-option and containment of intellectual opponents, not a benign example of reconciliation and community formation, as the Brahmanic scholars and their foreign imitators facetiously argue (Dwivedi 1941, Chaturvedi 1950, 1954, Lorenzen 2006). The hidden Brahmanic contempt for Kabir, however, sometimes spills over and can be seen in the abusive comment of a renowned 19th century “reformer:”

Kabir went to a Pundit to learn Sanskrit with him, but he insulted him by saying that he would not teach a weaver. In like manner, he went to several other Pundits but no one would teach him. Thereupon, he began to compose hymns etc., in incorrect and unidiomatic language and sing them to weavers and other low-class people to the accompaniment of a tambura. He especially spoke ill of the Vedas, the Shastras and the Pundits. Some ignorant persons were ensnared into his net. After his death, his followers made a great saint of him. His disciples kept on reading whatever he had composed in his lifetime.

(Dayananda Saraswati 2002, p. 442)

Neither Kabir nor any other nirguna radical was a disciple of any Brahman guru. And it was not Ramananda who was the pioneer of the movement in the north. It was Namdev (c. 1270–1350), the Marathi sant-poet, who played the role of “bridge-builder” between the north and the south, as a well-researched Marathi book *Sahitya Setu* by linguist Shridhar Kulkarni has convincingly proved. Namdev, in his later years, had become an itinerant sant and had finally settled in Punjab, composing his poems and spreading the *nirguna* devotionalism among the locals. As many as 61 poems out of Namdev’s 300-odd poems have found a niche in the *Guru Granth Sahib*, and all major sant-poets from the north including Kabir, Nanak, Ravidas, and Dadu Dayal, speak adoringly of Namdev.

According to Vaudeville, one of the most credible scholars on the Bhakti movement, “Kabir was never a Ramanandi” and “the fact remains that he never named a human guru.” None of the other sants did either as their very concept of Satguru was not in the human form.

Kabir and the other Sants undoubtedly inherited from Nathism their claim to divine spiritual awareness not from a particular guru, but from direct experience, an experience which Kabir calls *paracha* (Sanskrit *parichaya*). *Paracha* is conceived as the hearing of a mysterious Word or Sound (*shabda*) spoken in the depth of the soul by the *Satguru*. The silence Kabir and the other Sant poets maintained about their human gurus was certainly for them not only a matter of tradition but also of conviction. Yet, it was not understood by later Vaishnav writers, who interpreted their silence as some accident due to forgetfulness. By the time of Nabhaji [c.1600], the older Sants’ narrow connec-

tion with the Yogic tradition was somewhat obliterated, so that a number of apparently guru-less saints, beginning with Kabir, had to be fitted with a suitable guru, in the person of Ramananda, a high-caste, very respectable and dignified saint.

(Vaudeville 1993, p. 92)

Though confusion about Kabir's life and times still persist, now there is a growing consensus about the dates of his birth and death (1398–1448) and the fact that he was born and brought up in a family of weavers in the Banaras-Magahar region of Uttar Pradesh. His family, identified as *julaha* (weaver), had converted to Islam a generation or two earlier from the lower-caste *kori* (weaver) community. In earlier times, the weavers, the creators of the fabled Indian textiles, were organized into guilds and enjoyed social respect. Evidence suggests that the weavers and allied castes had become Buddhists in large numbers, especially in north-eastern India (Vaudeville 1993, p. 71). After the decline of Buddhism, they were absorbed in the orthodox caste system, and their systematic degradation as a "low caste" began. The weavers, however, never reconciled to their humiliation, and when the opportunity came, they revolted; they embraced Islam in the age of the Delhi Sultanate. The change of religion, however, did not make much difference to their social status. Snubbed by the Muslim ruling class, their equalitarian aspiration remained unfulfilled. In Kabir's time, the people treated his community contemptuously, as he bemoans in a famous couplet that says that everybody had reduced his caste to a laughing-stock, but it devotes itself to the Creator, and Kabir becomes a martyr to its cause.

Born and brought up in such a milieu, it was not unusual for Kabir to rebel against caste and Brahmanism. Vaudeville (1993, p. 73) contends that it is difficult to say whether the *julahas* of the area (from where Kabir came) were "converted to Islam from Hinduism or from Buddhism, since at that time and at that social level, both religions were amalgamated." Later forms of Buddhism, as we saw earlier, had survived from the earlier medieval India in the form of Sahajiya Siddhas and Nath Yogis. The Gorakhnathi Yogis were referred to simply as Jogi—also known by respectful titles like Avadhut, Gosai, Sadh, even Faqir and Pir. All Jogis were not ascetics, and in Bengal, the so-called Jegis or Jugis constitute a caste of weavers. Following the research of Sen and Dwivedi, Vaudeville (Vaudeville 1993, p. 76) suggests that "Nathism itself, as a kind of anti-Brahmanical, half-Buddhistic creed," was already widespread among weavers and some other artisan castes at the time of the Muslim conquest. According to K. M. Sen, the Jegis of Bengal were already outside the pale of Hinduism before most of them became Muslims, as was the case with *julahas*. Similarly, Dwivedi considers that the Nath-Yogis were nearer to Islam than to Hinduism in belief. Kabir came from such a background, and though he did not adhere to Nath-panthi beliefs, he was deeply familiar with the ideology and vocabulary of this essentially Buddhist, anti-Brahmanic tradition, which he made use of brilliantly in his social and philosophical critique.

Kabir had no formal education, but even a cursory reading of his poetry reveals that he was superbly educated in the university of life through what he has famously termed *sahaj sadhana* and *parakh-pad*. It was his empirical knowledge and rational thinking that led him to *anabhav sancha* which enabled him to reject with supreme confidence the solutions offered by the elites and their books. He would call his knowledge *suchchham veda* (critical knowledge), which was in contention against *sthool veda* (the gross knowledge of the Brahmanic canons). Kabir, thus, transgressed the conventional *mantra*, *tantra* and *yantra*. A challenging philosopher of life and a merciless critic of received ideas, he was gifted with a rare power to articulate his complex ideas in an expressive and powerful way. In an age dominated by orthodoxies of all kinds, he put to use his experience, observation and intellect to critique the established power. In a magnificent poem, addressed to his Brahmanic adversaries, he proclaims that his criteria for assessing reality

is *aakhin ki dekhi*, while the shifty-eyed pundit takes recourse to *kaagad ki lekhi* to pull wool over people's eyes. Addressing the pundit, Kabir says in a verse, that his viewpoint is very different from Kabir's own because the pundit depends on his reading while Kabir depends on what he sees with his own eyes. While the pundit is determined to keep the complexity of truth under wraps, Kabir wants to disentangle every knot to reach the core of truth.

Kabir, thus, comes across as a rationalist par excellence, not a mystic. Neither was he in thrall to the Vedic-Brahmanic knowledge, as we shall shortly see in his own words. Based on *parakh-pad* and *anabhai sancha*, the sant-poets like him were in search of an alternative knowledge which was emancipatory for both the self and society. Kabir gives voice to this great ambition in his sakhi *Fahama aage, fahama paachhe*:

Knowledge ahead, knowledge behind,  
Knowledge to the left and right,  
The knowledge that knows what knowledge is:  
that's the knowledge that's mine.

(Dharwadker 2003, p. 183)

Such quest of knowledge demanded removal of all falsehoods and fabrications, whether social or religious. And this is what he did brilliantly in many of his marvelous verses. With wit and verve, he mocked the dominant ideas and tore apart the tenets of organized religions. His constant effort, as Linda Hess (1986, p. 21) underlines,

was to strip away disguises, force confrontation, expose lies, promote honesty at every level. His socio-satirical poems, his psychological probes ... his crazy and paradoxical and mystical poems, do not inhabit separate categories. They are unified by a principle of radical honesty that sweeps through marketplace, temple, body and mind that will no more allow you to delude yourself than to cheat others.

In a fragmented and insular society, Kabir's advocacy of human unity based on equality was nothing less than revolutionary. He strove to demolish all barriers that separated human from human. He either dismissed the Hindu and Muslim ideas of religion or else equated them, saying that *Karim* and *Ram* are identical. Kabir's God is "neither in the temple nor in the mosque;" he is *ghat-ghat mein*, "in every heart." For him, God is not an object, nor the sort of reality that one can speak of and conceptualize; certainly not the sort one can see and worship. He found the sacrifices to the gods hideous, and he thought it was utter nonsense to picture God in a succession of animal and human incarnations "whose form could then be worshipped and adored and whose stories could spawn an industry of religious texts, complete with their Brahman interpreters" (Hawley and Juergensmeyer 1988, p. 43). "The religion he knows, if religion it is, is of a totally different order from the admonitions and assurances that put bread and butter on the tables of qazis and pundits" (Hawley and Juergensmeyer 1988).

Kabir was exemplar of a spirituality that did not need religious institutions and priesthood. It is the wily elite, he says, who have created religious rituals and textual authority to fool and rule the masses (Hess and Singh 1986, p. 52). In his view, the stress on distinctive rituals perpetuates animosity among followers of different religions. From this viewpoint, organized Islam is not very different from Hinduism, despite its pristine monotheism which is close to the *nirguna* spirit. Hence, Kabir targets both mullahs and pundits. In poem after poem, he makes a mockery

of their injunctions, admonitions, and pious assurances to the people. All this he does to open the people's eyes and undermine the priestly authority.

For Kabir, the Brahman was "the craftiest, the most unkind, the most status-conscious and vanity-ridden man on earth." Even his bhakti was pretense since that bhakti had no compassion for the other creations of God. In his eyes, it was the Brahman, more than anyone else, who was in need of basic education in humanity. Therefore, a major agenda of Kabir's life was to make the Brahman aware of his ignorance, his dishonesty, his callousness towards fellow humans, especially the lower castes. He did this using that most potent weapon he was so marvelous at wielding—ridicule. Tearing into the claims of the birth-based superiority, he asks: *Re baman tu bamani jaya, aan baant se kahi na aaya* (If you are a Brahman, born from a Brahmani, why didn't you enter this world through a different path?). Elsewhere, he asks: "Do you have milk in your veins while we have blood? If not, how are you a Brahman and we shudras?" Rejecting the caste distinctions, he says we are all "one skin and bone, one piss and shit, one blood, one meat." He sees refractions of the divine in all humans and has nothing but contempt for those who do not see this essential unity of humanity (Hess and Singh 1986, p. 67).

Kabir shows up the Brahman who projects himself as the repository of all knowledge, as "a rank ignoramus, a pompous fool lacking insight into reality." He derides the Brahman's babble and compares his holy books to "a cell made of paper" in which to imprison fools. They are to him "lovers of lust and delusion" who have the temerity to "laugh at the [real] lovers of God." In his poem *Pandit Baad Badante Jhhutha* (The Pandits' Pedantries Are Lies), he sarcastically asks: "Read, read, pandit, make yourself clever/ Does that bring freedom?2 The *Kaliyuga* is to him, "the age of phony Brahmans," and Veda and Puranas "a blind man's mirrors." The pandit, he says, is a "buffoon" who searches the sky but can't find out how to quell his pride. The pandit's meaningless rituals and prayers, ignorance and pride have made him a laughing-stock; no one could be lower than such a creature (Hess and Singh 1986, p. 85).

Some scholars erroneously see Kabir as an eclectic reformer of Hinduism and Islam. Some have even tried to fit him into the Brahmanic mold. Attempts have been made to create an image of Kabir that complies with the Vedic–Puranic tradition. He has been branded as an "individualistic" and a "mystic" and denied recognition even as a social critic. Kabir's poetry, however, brings out his radical credentials. He attacks the dogmas and cruelties of the dominant culture. And he ignites a similar sedition in his fellow travelers. In a well-known couplet he announces that he has burned down his own house and carries the torch in his hand; that he would burn down the house who wants to follow him (Hess and Singh 1986, p. 5).

Kabir took the road rarely traveled, singing *Apane raah tu chale Kabira* (Go your own way, Kabir). His way—made luminous by his experience, observance, and reflection—was not hamstrung by the rules of established religion, custom or caste. His hunger for truth, regardless of the cost, often brought him into conflict with the people in power as well as the custodians of religions. Despite threat to his life, he never desisted from telling what he saw around him. What he saw around him—people killing their souls and worshipping rocks, or worse, the sectarian zealots killing each other in the name of religion—deeply disturbed him; he could not reconcile himself to this "mad" world. He brings out the irony of such a situation when he says that people attack him for telling the truth of the world being mad, but trust him if he told them lies (Hess and Singh 1986, p. 42).

A pioneer of a new culture, Kabir's stress was on equalitarian remaking of society. He fought against caste and religious bigotry wherever he found them and so did many of his followers. Joining a non-caste group was one of the ways to escape the caste boundary, as many sects and organizations had done in the past. Kabir's followers, too, founded an independent religious community, the *Kabir-panth*, which received fervent response from

the community of artisans and cultivators. His ardent followers, millions in number, are still scattered all over the north of India, especially in the states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan.

Since his fight against the oppressive forces was uncompromising, Kabir has an enduring appeal as an anti-establishment symbol. It is notable that Kabir was a hero to two of modern India's greatest revolutionaries—Phule and Ambedkar. Many of Phule's radical associates, including Gyanoba Krishnaji Sasane, were Kabirpanthis. Kabir's poems, especially those that presented a sharp critique of caste, played a sparkling role in shaping their radicalism. Tukaram Hanuman Pinjan, a close associate of Phule, informs that it was Kabir's subversive verses which ignited the spark for formation of the Satyashodak Samaj (O'Hanlon 1985, pp. 229–30). Similarly, Ambedkar came from a Kabirpanthi family, and he considered the sant-poet as one of his gurus along with the Buddha and Phule. The colorful stories of Rabindranath Tagore and Gandhi's great admiration for Kabir are also well known, though their Brahmanic understanding of Kabir was very different from the Kabir that we have seen here. Moreover, Kabir is acknowledged as the father of Hindi literature, and perhaps the most quoted and most sung poet of India. His unique popularity remains undiminished, as the very name Kabir radiates images of a colorful revolutionary, a people's poet, and a cultural hero unlike any other.

### Ravidas

Ravidas (c. 1450–1520) was another Bhakti stalwart in the north. Born into a community of leather workers, he indicates his wider family to which he belonged by mentioning some of his illustrious predecessors. The names he gives are that of Namdev, Trilochan and Kabir (Hawley and Juergensmeyer 1988, p. 12). While the first two hailed from western India, Kabir lived in Banaras, Ravidas's home turf. "In mentioning these three as recipients of divine grace along with himself, Ravidas underscored his sense of solidarity with a tradition of Bhakti that flowed with particular animation in the lower ranks of society" (Hawley and Juergensmeyer 1988). Like Kabir and other subaltern sant-poets, Ravidas's spirituality is tinged with an egalitarian ethos. He visualizes God as "deliverer of the poor," "uplifter of the lowly" and "purifier of the defiled."

Ravidas raises crucial questions about the social hierarchy and speaks of an ideal society "where none are third or second—all are one," and where the people "do this or that, they walk where they wish." He dreams of an earthly paradise in his poem "Be-gham-pura," the City without Sorrow which he ends saying,

Oh, says Ravidas, a tanner now set free,  
Those who beside me are my friends

(Hawley and Juergensmeyer 1988, p. 32)

His disdain for those who proudly uphold the shastras and the discriminatory socio-religious order based on them often comes to the fore. He chastises those who denigrate people belonging to castes and communities other than their own. He stresses that even the lowest can rise to great heights by acquiring noble qualities, and he considers such self-actualized individuals superior than the priests and kings. He concludes:

As the lotus leaf floats above the water, Ravidas says,  
so he flowers above the world of his birth.

(Hawley and Juergensmeyer 1988, p. 25)

It was Ravidas who gave the call of *jaat-paat poochhe nahi koi, hari ka bhaje so hari ka hoi*. He often refers to his humble birth and leatherwork, stressing the dignity of an occupation and caste that had come to be regarded as low and not respectable. He defies the conventional wisdom by arguing that despite his allegedly “low” occupation he too is as important as the “well-born,” many of whom come to him to pay their homage:

am now  
the lowly one to whom the mighty Brahmans come  
And lowly bow.

(Hawley and Juergensmeyer 1988, p. 25)

Ravidas mocks the notion of purity and pollution in a beautiful poem *With What Can I Worship?* He pictures an innocent and bright young girl asking questions about the offerings to be made to the deity. He teases the purity-obsessed by showing that everything deemed to be pure is tainted, but does real devotion need those pure items in the first place? He would rather worship with his body and mind and find the formless Lord. He will not do any rituals or make offerings (Hawley and Juergensmeyer 1988, p. 26)

### **Dadu and other sant-poets**

Another remarkable sant-poet was Kabir’s Rajasthani follower, Dadu Dayal (d. 1603). It is significant that Dadu calls his path *nipakh* or non-sectarian. This was a bid to rise above the disputation of religious communities and establish harmony among the people. Calling himself “neither a Hindu nor a Muslim,” he dismisses all revealed scriptures, valuing only personal devotion to the spirit of God and humanity. In many of his poems which possess great beauty and force, Dadu asserts that all humans have the same essence, and that differences based on color, caste or race are superfluous. It pains him that the world is divided among antagonistic sects and castes as few dare to defy the sectarian traditions.

Writing towards the end of the 17th century, Dharmadas, Darya Saheb and Yari Saheb of Bihar also underlined the same sentiments. Dharmadas stresses the fundamental unity of humanity and irrationality of the birth-based caste. Darya Saheb says, “All humans suffer from hunger or thirst, or feel pain or pleasure in the same way.” Different rituals and beliefs, he says, cannot make a difference to the status of humans. Similarly, Yari Saheb insists that “Gold is the same everywhere whether it is in melted form or an ornament. Who can say which is higher and which is lower?”

### **Guru Nanak**

Towering above these figures is the charismatic personality of Guru Nanak (1469–1546), who founded a new faith, Sikhism. He drew the people’s attention in the simple and interactive language of Punjab to the true relationship between God and human, and human and human. Brahmanism looked down upon Punjab as a fallen land, out of bounds for the Varnashrama Dharma. The region, indeed, saw the admixture of many ethnic identities and cultures. Nanak’s arrival on the scene further invigorated this trend and gave a fillip to the cultural blending. The movement he led unleashed the forces that brought about a major change in the religious, social and political outlook of the Punjabi people.

The founder of Sikhism campaigned for a universal religion and attacked divisive categories of castes, rites and rituals. He laid stress on the importance of true knowledge manifested in love and compassion for fellow humans as a necessary means of spiritual awakening. Religion, for him, consists not in a string of words but in high thinking and noble behavior. This implies that only those who see all humans as equal and treat them humanely are truly religious.

Nanak shows no appreciation for the ruling class, whether Hindu or Muslim. He displays no sympathy for the religious elite either. He identifies himself with the common people. What move him are the misery, ignorance and helplessness of the people. That no one is denied the means of liberation became the supreme purpose of his life. His message, therefore, was meant for all. The universality of his message is the obverse of his idea of equality (Grewal 1999, pp. 19–20).

Nanak's inclusive vision clashed with all sectarian ideology. Rejecting the Brahmanic scriptures, incarnations and idolatry, he despised the priests who sold superstition and false hope to the gullible masses. His chose the path of humanitarian concern, in which the theological aspect was not divorced from the sociological one. For him, truth was not only an abstract notion of the Supreme Reality but also a practical principle of social conduct. Guru Nanak—and the Gurus who succeeded him—believed that we cannot shirk our family and social responsibility by branding the world as an illusion. We are responsible for our life and endowed with the ability to remake ourselves through reflection and action. Nanak laid stress on virtuous living: “Truth is higher, but higher still is truthful living.” The steps he prescribes to his followers to achieve self-actualization are simple: Participation in productive activities and proper human conduct. As he put it, “Those alone know the right path who earn their bread by the sweat of their brow and share it with others.” The personality so developed, he said, must wage a ceaseless struggle, not only with one's selfish ego, but also in the realm of social relations.

The *Adi Granth*, which contains Nanak's teachings and constitutes the core of Sikh theology, incorporates several poems from the earlier radical sants such as Kabir and Ravidas. This is not surprising since the social philosophy of Guru Nanak bore a striking similarity to that of Kabir and Ravidas, whom he held in the highest esteem. He challenged caste distinctions, both by precept and example. A case in point is a well-known incident that has become a part of the folk memory. At Sayyidpur he stayed and dined with Lalo, a carpenter, and declined the feast of Malik Bhago, a high-caste landlord, on the grounds that the latter had accumulated his wealth by exploiting the poor while the former earned his bread by hard work. In a rare frisson of compassion for those held in contempt for their “lowly origin,” he expresses his feeling that his followers from lower castes “may wear shoes made from my skin.” He also established a radical practice by insisting that his followers must be willing to eat in a common kitchen—*langar*.

The rise of the Sikh community as a hardworking and prosperous people in a country teeming with the poor is largely the result of dignity of labor and egalitarianism enshrined in the ideology of Nanak and his successors. At the instance of the last Guru, Gobind Singh, every male Sikh bears—and shares—the surname Singh, as does every female the surname Kaur. The objective behind this was to make the traditional caste identities unimportant. In this and other respects the Sikh Gurus were harbingers of ideas which have contributed to making Indian culture humane and inclusive.

The Bhakti leaders tried to transcend sectarian differences. Many of them protested against the low position given to women and encouraged them to join their menfolk in various activities. When the followers of Kabir, Ravidas and Nanak gathered together, women were not excluded.

### **Mira Bai**

Mira Bai, a Rajasthani Rajput princess and the author of some of the finest hymns in Hindi, broke out of her gilded prison to become a disciple of Ravidas. A high-caste princess taking a guru from among the “untouchables” represents a rebellion against the caste-feudalism of the time. According to a remarkable research (Mukta 1997), Mira after leaving her princely home found a new community among the marginalized people of Rajasthan and adjacent regions. She forged a new bond with the despised and toiling people. In her new life, companionship made up for material deprivation. Mira made a radical reversal in which manual labor, even the skinning of animals and dyeing of skin, became valued. As she says:

My work is to dye.  
This dyeing is dear to me, this dyeing is dear to me,  
Dye my soul in it.

(Mukta 1997, p. 112)

Mira’s abandonment of her feudal husband, her acceptance of the “untouchable” Ravidas as her guru, her audacity of joining the company of saints, and her love affair with the despised communities paint the picture of a sublimely rebellious character. Her “outrageous” behavior and subversive activities were nothing short of a stinging insult to “Rajput honor.” There are stories about her insulted husband, the Rana, how he tried everything he could to “reform” his wayward wife, to bring her back. When he failed to win her over, he sent her poison. Mira disappears, or dies, under uncertain circumstances. Many contend, and so does Parita Mukta, that Mira, in all likelihood, was eliminated on the orders of her outraged husband.

### **The Brahmanic backlash**

Recognizing the danger of incendiary bhakti, the upper-caste devotees of caste and Brahmanism joined the movement to contain its radicalism from within. It is striking that against the monotheistic radicalism of *nirguna* bhakti, the poet-devotees belonging to upper castes—Chaitanya, Surdas, Vidyapati, Vallabhacharya and Tulsidas—professed *saguna* bhakti. While the first four were besotted with their flute-playing Krishna, his *lila* (playfulness) and dalliances with damsels, Tulsi made Rama, the upholder par excellence of Varnashrama Dharma, his hero. They also celebrated love, harmony and morality but within the hierarchical structure of Varnashrama. Anusooya’s teachings to Sita in Tulsi’s *Ramacharitamanasa* leaves little doubt that greater than truth, compassion and love was adherence to the caste-imposed duties. Against the attempted subversion of the Brahmanical order by *nirguna* stalwarts such as Kabir, Ravidas, Dadu and Nanak, the proponents of the *saguna* school tried to establish the infallibility of the shastras and the necessity of a caste code of conduct for a good life. For them, caste was essential for social stability, and so salvation was to be sought within the confines of the caste order. The striking absence of any significant poet-thinker from the subaltern categories within the *saguna* devotionalism is not surprising.

The Brahmanical choice of *saguna* over *nirguna* was loaded with crucial significance. *Saguna* bhakti implied worship of gods and their *avatars* whose mythology was the brainchild of the Brahmins and confined in the Itihasa-Purana and Sanskritized versions of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. The *Devas*, their *avatars* and *lilas* (which playfully explained away the social division of labor—disenfranchising Shudras and women from education and power) was, in all likelihood, deliberate and

premeditated. The proponents of *nirguna*, as we saw earlier, were ranged against all this. Thus, the *saguna-nirguna* conflict symbolizes, at the cultural-ideological level, the unresolved strife between the caste elites and the subaltern multitude. Not for nothing in the *Uttarakanda of Ramacharitamanasa*, Tulsi, arguably the greatest proponent of the *saguna* school, beats his breast bemoaning the emergence of Shudra religious preachers as the unmistakable sign of degradation in the *Kaliyuga*. Appalled at what the Shudras taught, Tulsi wrote with a vengeance against the Shudra teachers. He was aghast at the rise of religious teachers from the lower orders and mocks them thus:

People of the lowest castes according to the varna-dharma—oilmen, potters, dog-eaters, Kirats, Kols, distillers—shave their heads and turn religious mendicants when their wives die or they lose their household goods).

*(Prasad 1990, p. 634)*

Tulsi curses the *Kaliyuga* in which the Shudras consider themselves as learned as Brahmans, enter into disputations with them, and dare to give discourses on religion and society.

It is notable that Tulsi's Rama is not formless as Kabir and Nanak would expound, but an incarnation of God, born the son of a king to maintain a kingdom of varna, righteousness and Brahmanic supremacy. Similarly, the Sanskrit *Ramayana* of Valmiki, too, is full of caste chauvinism. In the *Ayodhyakanda*, Valmiki's Rama is even made to pronounce that the Buddha was a thief and that those who accept his teachings and do not believe in the gods, must be punished. Tulsi further reworked this to invigorate Brahmanism. The killing of Shambuka, a Shudra aspirant to spiritual power, narrated in the *Uttarakanda* of Tulsi's *Ramayana* is a classic example of the Brahmanic attempt to sacralize the caste ideology. Shambuka, the story goes, was practicing religious austerities and that resulted in the death of a Brahman's son! The bereaved father reported the news to Rama, and Rama through meditation came to the swift conclusion that the Brahman's son had died because Shambuka the Shudra was practicing meditation in violation of his caste duty. Rama tracked down and killed Shambuka; the gods showered flowers in celebration; the dead Brahman boy resurrected.

This story shows that the storyteller had lost all sense of moral and social propriety in his eagerness to justify the Brahmanic self-interest. The glorification of such a barbarous act—committed by no less a person than Rama who is *Maryada Purushottam* (the embodiment of Man Supreme)—is not surprising when education was monopolized by a particular caste which used it to keep the multitude in servitude. Rama thus is presented as an archenemy of the Shudras. He is also shown as a blind defender of the male order. He forces his wife Sita to undergo a fire-ordeal to prove her chastity, and he banishes the pregnant Sita to the jungle to fend for herself.

Why did Tulsi choose to re-tell the Rama story, not any other story? It seems that a caste chauvinist like him could not have used a more popular story and its legendary hero to propagate Brahmanism with a vengeance. Following Manu, Tulsi sums up his objective in these words, "Though a Brahman curse you, beat you or speak cruel words—he should be worshipped, so sing the saints." Tulsi put these words in Rama's mouth, and goes on to recommend:

*Pujiyे bipra sil guna hina sudra na gun-gyan pravina.*

(A Brahman must be revered though he be devoid of amiability and virtue; not so a Shudra, however distinguished for all virtue and learning.)

*(Prasad 1990, p. 414)*

Tulsi's diatribe against Shudras appears a typical Brahmanic rebuff to Ravidas' rational exhortation (at about the same time when Tulsi was glorifying caste):

*Brahman mat pujiye, jau howe gun-hin*

*Pujahin charan chandala ke, jau-howe gun-pravin.*

(Don't honour a Brahman who is without merit; honour instead the feet of a Dalit who is virtuous and talented.)

Tulsi, at many places, spews venom against women in foul language. Lamenting the decadence of women in the Kali age, he writes in *Uttarakanda*:

Women have no ornament except their tresses and have enormous appetite (are never satisfied).

Though miserable for want of money, they are rich in attachment of various kinds.

Though hankering after happiness, they have no regard for piety, stupid as they are.

Though they are poor in wits, their minds are hardened and know no tenderness.

(Prasad 1990, p. 636)

Obviously, as a self-appointed guardian of the reactionary Brahman community, Tulsi was rattled by the unprecedented emergence of cultural leaders from below. They had started thinking for themselves. Tulsi's own town—Banaras—was reverberating with Kabir and Ravidas's seditious teachings, openly mocking Brahmanism. Kabir's *Santau bhai, utthi gyan ki aandhi* gives a tantalizing glimpse of the storm (movement) of knowledge that was sweeping through the region.

## Conclusion

To summarize, the Bhakti movement of subaltern sant-poets challenged the established religious and social order of medieval India. In hindsight, it seems that the presence of Muslim rule provided some fillip to the movement in the sense that the new rulers were not very keen to support the Brahmanic power as the earlier Kshatriya kings had done. Though weakened, the Brahmanic forces retaliated, intruded the movement, and invoked Rama, the legendary king of Ayodhya. The Shambuka-slayer came to their rescue this time too to reassert their social supremacy. A morally questionable work like *Ramacharitamanasa* extolling the virtues of caste and Brahmanism was glorified and transformed into a vehicle for the reimposition of caste-feudal values. The humanist spirit and egalitarian agenda of the movement were crushed. Small wonder, Tulsi was the last major poet of the Bhakti movement in the north. His celebration of Varnashrama Dharma virtually marked the end of the movement.

The defining feature of the Bhakti movement was a radical religiosity, intimately bound with a demand and campaign for socio-cultural change. At the heart of the movement was the transforming zeal, while religiosity was an offshoot of this zeal. Its leaders wielded religiosity as a weapon against caste and Brahmanism. The language of the protest in an idiom that the common people could understand was especially imperative in the absence of modern-secular ideas and institutions. In other words, the religiosity the sant-poets employed was a decoy as it covered the whole gamut of culture, including the social and the political. Rejecting the elites' grand illusions and deceptive holiness, the sant-poets struggled to bring *gyan ki aandhi* (the storm of knowledge) to dispel the enslaving darkness. They challenged the tenets of caste-feudalism in a caste-feudal age and asserted that though the world was afflicted by poverty, ignorance and sorrow, these could be overcome by social equality, productive work and a virtuous life. We can

grasp the dynamics of the Bhakti movement better if we grasp that “religion is a long-term politics and politics a short-time religion,” as Ram Manohar Lohia once observed. The point is, the religiosity of the sant-poets cannot be seen separately from their politics of emancipation. That is why their poems are still read, recited, translated and transmitted. The movement died, but the incendiary words of the sant-poets survived, and thus their legacy continues.

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# 3

## THOUGHT AND IDEOLOGY OF JOTIRAO PHULE

*Gail Omvedt*

### Introduction

Jotirao Phule is considered the founder of the anti-caste movement—and the forerunner of peasant movements, women's liberation movements and others. He is a powerful, iconic figure who is remembered for his revolutionary thought and ideology above all. He was also an organizer and activist, the founder of the Satyashodhak Samaj which became the main radical anti-caste organization of Maharashtra, spreading in villages as much as in the cities and carrying on campaigns throughout the state.

### Phule and the Indian renaissance

It is important to see Phule and the movement he founded not in isolation but in the context of the general colonial situation and the efforts of Indians to respond to it. In Maharashtra, Brahman and non-Brahman social and political activity developed parallel to and influenced by one another as well as by the pressure of the British rulers. Phule's organization, the Satyashodhak Samaj, was founded in 1873, only seven years after the founding of the most influential elite Bombay province social reform organization, the Prarthana Samaj, and about the same time as the primary north Indian reform organization which was to develop an equivalent mass-base, the Arya Samaj. Similarly, though the non-Brahman movement did not become a mass movement until the 20th century (for that matter, the national movement itself did not develop a real "mass" support even among more elite groups until the 20th century), its formation paralleled that of elite political bodies: The Satyashodhak Samaj was founded only two years after Maharashtra's first political organization, the Poona Sarvajanik Sabha, and some 12 years before the Indian National Congress held its first session. Similarly, the Satyashodhak newspaper, *Deen Bandhu* (Brother of the Poor), was established in 1875, eight years before the most important Brahman nationalist papers, *Kesari* and *Mahratta*, were set up. Clearly, then, a process of mutual influence was at work.

The beginning point of this process was the "Indian renaissance." This is the term applied to the efforts of the first generation of Indian thinkers under colonialism to come to grips with the challenge represented by the West and the seeming backwardness of their own society and culture. With ruthless self-criticism they sought to lay the ground for a total social transformation,

to weld science and rationality to Indian culture, to recreate India. Of this generation, Jotirao Phule and his thought stand out as an expression of first-generation renaissance thinking.

This generation, however, was succeeded by one more concerned with the alien source of new ideas than with the errors of the old society. Underlying this change was the solidification of British colonial rule after the middle of the 19th century, which ensured the development of a narrowly based elite drawn from the upper castes, feeding in through the educational system to the British bureaucracy. Colonial rule thus ensured the power and status of the elite—making them concerned about threats from below to this status—at the same time as it made them restively aware that they were after all serving an alien bureaucracy, but as subordinates not rulers within it. Henceforward, however much they spoke of the “Hindu tradition” and the “Indian nation,” their thoughts and actions expressed the interests of a class and not of a whole people. Hence, they opted, as elites do, not for a revolutionary social transformation but for “modernization,” in other words a revitalization of the old society.

Their identification was as an elite equipped with education and knowledge, as upper castes within the Hindu cultural system, and as modern intellectuals concerned about the scientific and industrial progress of India. Hence, they developed an ideology which sought to use a revitalized Hindu tradition as the spiritual and moral center around which the liberal modernism of the West could be grafted: “Eastern morals and Western science.” They accepted the “Aryan theory of race,” which had the implication of identifying them ethnically with their British conquerors rather than the majority of their fellow countrymen, which traced civilization in India from the Aryan conquest, and which gave a new pseudo-scientific justification for the caste hierarchy. And they developed an economic theory which looked to the capitalist development of India freed from the destructive bonds of British imperialism; therefore, they opposed foreign exploitation without considering the exploitation of workers by native capitalists or of peasants by landlords and the lower bureaucracy.

But the majority of Indians were dark-skinned non-Aryans. The majority of Indians, in traditional *varna* terms, were Shudras. The majority of Indians were peasants and had no hope in the near or distant future of becoming members of the bureaucratic elite, or capitalists, small or big. The liberal modernization of Indian culture and the capitalist development of India did not speak to their interests. Peasants, tribals, workers, low castes, untouchables were all adversely affected by the colonial regime and responded, like the upper-caste elite, with both renaissance and rebellion. But lacking access to education, lacking control over media of communication, their renaissance and their rebellion, their ideology and organization, remained in a more incipient, crude, localized and incomplete form. Nevertheless, it may be said that with Jotirao Phule the low-caste, non-Aryan peasant masses of India came to consciousness.

To discuss Phule’s thought as a peasant ideology is to stress that he was not an adjunct to all the other social reformers of the 19th century but represented a very different set of interests and a very different outlook on India from all the upper-caste elite thinkers who have dominated the awareness of both Indian and foreign intellectuals. The elite expressed an ideology of what may be called the “national revolution,” if we define nationalism as opposition to Western colonial rule and remember that it was a nationalism of a class combining bourgeois and high-caste traditions. Phule represented the ideology of the social revolution in its earliest form, with a peasant and anti-caste outlook which saw as its primary enemy that very elite.

Phule’s thought represented the fulfillment of the renaissance desire for social transformation along revolutionary lines. In sociological terms, it makes good sense that he, rather than later and more widely known elite thinkers, should be seen as the primary renaissance figure. Any culture, after all, rests upon class society and the dominance of a particular class. Hence, the total transformation of culture requires the destruction of this dominance. In terms of India, Hindu

culture and the caste system rested upon Brahmanism; hence Phule, who aimed for the complete destruction of caste, superstition and inequality, linked his thought with a movement of opposition to the Brahman elite. “Non-Brahmanism” in India, therefore, represents not simply communalism or a result of British divide-and-rule policies; it traces its origins to the Indian renaissance and represents the first expression of social revolution in India.

## Background

By the first quarter of the 19th century India had been under colonial rule for a sufficient period for it to become established. Yet colonial rule did not destroy the old feudal caste system but rather strengthened it in some ways. Agriculture was subordinated; an indebted peasantry toiled the land, often losing their lands to moneylenders. Brahmins filled the bureaucracy, being the main group to take advantage of the educational opportunities the British offered. Their dominance was felt by all the subordinated castes. The Shudra peasantry remained their prey, cheated for religious ceremonies and priestly greediness. The Ati-Shudra Dalits were mainly agricultural laborers or who did *vethbegar*—carrying out caste-ordained tasks such as carrying away dead cattle.

## Beginnings of organizing

Yet, a few from subaltern castes could make it into education. Of these, one was the young Jotirao, who studied in a Scottish mission school in Pune. Born in 1827 to a Mali or gardener, he was given initial education in a mission school, then withdrawn apparently at the instigation of a Brahman who argued that education was useless for a non-Brahman. He returned to school in 1841, a period in which he began to teach his young wife Savitribai how to read and write. In the school he evidently made the acquaintance of his first Brahman friend, S. B. Govande, and was influenced by mission teaching, by Thomas Paine’s *Rights of Man*, by the lives of George Washington and Shivaji, and by ideas of freedom for India stimulated partly by local revolts of low-caste Kolis and Ramoshis. However, his attention quickly turned to social reform, partly through awareness of the problems of the untouchables and partly by an incident of personal insult in which he was invited to the marriage ceremony of a Brahman friend and then told by one of the orthodox to leave. After his graduation, he began a career of social reforms, including founding schools for untouchable boys and for girls. Orthodox pressure on his father forced him to leave his home at the time and support himself. He did so, making his living as a contractor.

In spite of incidents of caste prejudice, the early period was nevertheless one of cooperation between Phule and the Brahman reformers. In 1849, he supported the petition of liberal Brahmins to change the *dakshina* prize fund into one of prizes for Marathi books—and the form of his support was a significant index of the nature of Brahman–non-Brahman relationships: for when the reformers were threatened by the orthodox, Jotirao, with a group of about 200 men from the untouchable locality, provided them with mass protection. This situation occurred again in 1875 with the visit of Dayanand Saraswati to Poona; again, Jotirao and the low castes provided mass support. At the same time, the Brahman reformers provided significant help to three schools for girls that he established in 1845, 1851 and 1852, with Savitribai as teacher. In 1852, he also set up a school for the untouchables.

Phule’s educational efforts continued until about 1858–60, but by this time the pressure from the orthodox was growing. As liberal Brahman support gradually ceased, Phule’s position began to harden and he increasingly drew his backing from a growing community of non-Brahman merchants and contractors, many with roots in the villages, many based in Mumbai. In 1865, he

published the second edition of Padval's *Jatibhed Viveksar*, and in 1869, he himself wrote a long *powada* or narrative poem on Shivaji, depicting him as the protector of the peasants. Though this was submitted to the Dakshina Prize Committee, it was rejected for Brahman compositions which portrayed Shivaji as the patriotic leader against the Mughals. Finally, when Brahman orthodox power began to consolidate by the 1870s, Phule's disillusionment was complete. He rejected his schoolboy nationalism as a product of Brahman influence, and turned his attention to full-scale social revolt.

### **The Satyashodhak Samaj**

In 1873 Phule formed the Satyashodhak Samaj, with backing from some well-to-do non-Brahmans, primarily contractors and a few professionals. The Samaj vowed to carry on religious ceremonies without Brahman priests—and to educate both sons and daughters. The Samaj remained as a major, agitating social organization for many years after that. Its center of gravity was in the villages. Peasant cultivators such as Maratha-Kunbis, Malis, Kolis and Dhangars all played a prominent role. Malis, in particular, were represented out of proportion to their numbers, partly because Phule and such colleagues as Krishnarao Bhalekar and Narayan Lokhande were of this caste and initial relationships of caste provided an important point for communication of the Satyashodhak message. Artisans and low castes were also important members of these village organizations. For example, of 46 names listed among Ahmednagar contributors of 17 villages to a Satyashodhak Samaj Fund in 1915, there is one Kulkarni, one Shimpi, one Teli, one Chambhar, one Mahar and two Dhangars. The response of these non-cultivating castes is also indicated by the fact that leading activists after Phule's death, those who wandered through the villages propagating the movement, included a Sonar (Bhimrao Mahamuni), a Gosavi (Dhyangiribuva), a Kumbhar (Pandit Dhondiram Namdev) as well as Marathas from Otur.

What of untouchables? In one sense, the Satyashodhak Samaj was an organization directed mainly at carrying broad and radical reform to the large mass of peasants. Untouchables did not traditionally use Brahman priests. Yet, the fight against untouchability was as crucial to the equalitarian work of the Samaj as fighting Brahmanism. Not only Phule, but almost every important Satyashodhak leader had a clear record in this area. Most important untouchable leaders before Ambedkar were supported by Satyashodhak leaders; papers like *Din Mitra* directed articles to them and responses and articles written by them. Thus, among three Satyashodhak meetings in Pune in 1896 one is recorded in *Maharwada* in which Bhalekar presided over the presentation of a roll of honor to Gopal Baba Walangkar, the earliest Mahar leader; the pages of *Din Bandhu* in this period record many articles on Walangkar. Similarly, the biographer of Shivaram Kamble, another early Mahar leader of Pune, was a Satyashodhak, Harischandra Navalkar. Several Satyashodhak members assisted Vitthal Ramji Shinde, the more moderate non-Brahman, in his work in welfare activities for untouchables.

Phule's rationalism was expressed in the Satyashodhak Samaj with its primary emphasis on "truth seeking." It is significant that the truth-seeking was seen as a quest guided by the individual's own reason and not by the dictats of any religious guru or authoritative text. This was important for the development of the Satyashodhak Samaj in that it left it without any centralized organization. The movement was spread by individual propagandizing efforts; it was taken up in spontaneous ways and attained a real village base in almost all sections of Maharashtra, but it never had an overall controlling body and members complained of "chaos" within the organization. Similarly, while it urged education, scientific thinking and self-performed social-religious ceremonies, it did not hold forth an alternative religious ritual. When one of the orthodox charged that the Samaj could not properly be called a religious body since it had no

authoritative text, no *dharma-granth*, one of its main leaders, Mukundrao Patil, replied, “We do not want to have a religious book but to satisfy that intellectual curiosity of the people.” This, indeed, was Phule’s spirit.

Even more crucial was Phule’s passionate equalitarianism, which can be seen at all levels of his thought and action. It was expressed for example in his very language, the terminology of his writings. This language shows a positive identification with some of the social categories considered “low” in traditional culture. This may be called a kind of equalitarian reversal similar to the “black is beautiful” movement among African Americans. Specifically, in referring to the masses of India, he constantly used the term *shudra-atishudra*. *Shudra*, of course, is the term by which the dominant Brahmanical culture classified those who worked with their hands. Phule was well aware of the insulting connotations of the term, (he noted that it was derived from *ksudra* meaning “trifling” or “mean”) but he ignored this and continued to insist with matter of factness on use of the term: These, he was saying in effect, *are* the people, the center of society. He did not show the least desire to “Sanskritize” the way almost all educated caste leaders did by claiming a *ksatriya* or high-caste *varna* origin for his or any other caste. He did, it is true, identify *ksatriyas* as the original warriors of India and used the word frequently—but never as an alternative to *shudra*, rather as inclusive of all original Indians, from Kunbi-Marathas through Mahars.

Another aspect of his identification with the masses is his ambivalence if not hostility to what has been called the “regional Great Tradition” of Maharashtra, that is, the “Maratha” tradition. In his time, before the Kunbi-Maratha distinction had been in practice abolished, “Kunbi” referred to the peasant population, “Maratha” to the aristocrats, the *shahhanavkuli* or “ninety-six families.” Phule showed no inclination to identify with the Maratha tradition in opposition to Brahmanism; he almost never used the term “Maratha” and when he did, it was so slightlying.

Phule’s orientation was towards the peasant and his problems. This is graphically shown in his biting and concrete, almost photographic, description of the peasant amidst his poverty, with his meager food and clothing, harassed by officials and moneylenders. This is heightened by his identification of the peasant as Baliraja, the traditional Marathi way of saying the peasant is “lord of the land.” Again, it must be emphasized that Phule did not see the village leaders only as Baliraja; his orientation was towards the village, but a village modernized in terms of equality. Unlike many of his followers and colleagues, he almost never referred to the “Patil” or identified with the interests of the village headman as a foundation of the traditional village community. Baliraja, in his usage, is the peasant, the common man. This is clear in *Gulamgiri* where he described the Brahmanic tradition as anti-equalitarian (anti-Bali) and traced the growth of nationalism in the West: The English, he wrote, learned patriotism from the Greeks but only later learned the importance of the peasant (Bali) and thereby developed a democratic nationalism, while the American revolution made the common man (Bali) the center of their society.

In regard to the issue of women’s liberation, Phule is one of the very few male social reformers who deserve a woman’s respect. His depth of feeling on the matter was great enough that he was ready to attack one of his co-workers, Krishnarao Bhalekar. Bhalekar, it seems, had written a severe criticism of a book by Tarabai Shinde comparing men and women, *Stri-Purush Tilna*. Phule replied in 1885 with an attack that was as ferocious as his attacks on Brahmins. Bhalekar was attacked as representative of the old Indian family system which allowed a free and decadent life to the man while the woman was helplessly bound to the home; the issue was the formation of a new and equalitarian husband-wife relationship; the goal was the breakdown of the old authority structure within the family. Phule seems to have sensed accurately that as long as there was inequality in the family, there could be no true equality in society. Suppression of women, in traditional Hindu culture, went hand in hand with suppression of the low castes and untouchables.

As with the low castes, this approach towards women was reflected in his language. In his last book, *Sarvanajanik Satya dharma*, he referred throughout not to “men” (in Marathi—*manus*) in such phrases as “all men are created equal,” but used throughout the phrase *sarve ekander sti-purush*, “each and every woman and man,” which is as innovative in Marathi as in English. Similarly, his Satyashodhak wedding ceremonies were innovative in two ways, in dispensing with the Brahman priestly intermediaries, and in including in the central passage a strong promise by the husband that he will protect his wife and allow her such rights as education.

## **Writings**

Phule’s major writings are *Gulamgiri* (Slavery), *Shetkaryaca Asud* (Whipcord of the Cultivators) and *Sarvajanik Satyadharma Pustak* (Book of the Public Religion of Truth). Besides these he wrote several akhands, or poems. The term “akhand” was taken from the “abhang” of the great saint-poets or sant-poets of the Bhakti movement of Maharashtra.

In *Gulamgiri*, written in dialogue form, Phule described the stages of conquest by the Aryan (Brahman) invaders, using the theory of avatars of Vishnu as a metaphor. Each avatar marked a stage of conquest. It is a biting, satirical account of the enslavement of the “Shudra-Atishudra” majority of the population. Its introduction was in English. He writes there of the Aryans, “They appear to have been a race imbued with very high notions of self, extremely arrogant and bigoted” (Keer 1969). He compared the European subjugation of the native people in America with that of the Aryan subjugation of the indigenous population of India. Phule calls for schools in every village, but insists, “away with all Brahman school-masters!” (Keer 1969, p. 82).

To comprehend the extent to which Phule’s thinking was revolutionary from a cultural point of view, we can begin with one simple fact: In almost all his writings, he never uses the term “Hindu.” Contrary to practically every other Indian of his day and the majority of his followers, he does not take his standpoint from within a valued cultural tradition and seek to locate the essence of it from which other aspects can be criticized. Rather, he takes a stand from without and judges the whole culture in terms of two ruthlessly applied values, rationality and equality. This is not to say that he was speaking as an alien to Indian society: His actions, language and writings show a clear placement among and identification with the masses and their traditions. He does not take a stand outside the society, but rather one outside the *cultural system* which had for so long dominated that society.

From the point of view of equality, the entire caste system and the authoritarian family structure was to be condemned. From the point of view of rationality, the whole system of superstition and religious traditionalism was to be overthrown, the whole corpus of religious writings stripped of authority. With this as his beginning point, Phule was saved from a good deal of unnecessary arguments, qualifications, compromises and logical inconsistencies. He did not, for instance, waste much breath arguing over the relative merits of different parts of the Hindu sacred scriptures. He simply treated them as legends which may offer some insight into past Indian history, and as products of a group (Brahmans, Aryans) seeking to establish control over the minds of the people.

In dismissing totally the dominant religious tradition of India, Phule accepted the assumption that something had to be put in its place: Even a revolutionary culture required a moral-religious center. He did not reject the idea of *dharma* but rather attempted to establish a universalistic one. *Sarvajanik Satyadharma* (the “universal religion of truth”) expresses this concept completely; the moral basis of society had to be centered on truth, or rationality, and it had to be one that unified all men and women as equals rather than fragmenting them and dividing them into separate social groups with separate responsibilities and rights, as the traditional *dharma* did in separating

the castes. The world was seen as good and holy; in contradiction to the Vedantic idea of it as an illusion, because it is God's creation; and God is seen in simple terms as the loving parent (in the Indian expression which avoids Semitic patriarchalism, *ma-bap*) of all humans who are thus equally valued as his children. This basic concept was used in all Satyashodhak teachings to justify the idea of equality and the assertion that no "middlemen" or priests, *dalals*, were necessary between man and God.

Education, he always felt, was key to the liberation of the Shudra-Atishudra masses. *Vidyavina mati gelī, mativina gati gelī, gativina vita gelī, vitavina shudra kachle*: "Without education morals were lost, without morals development was lost, without development wealth was lost; without wealth the Shudras were ruined." So much was lost through lack of education!

### Aryans and non-Aryans

Phule's ideology was based on an identification with the peasant masses and an attachment to the revolutionary values of equality and rationality. But a complete ideology must contain not only basic values but also an explanation of the present state or condition of society and a guide to action for change. As a mass ideology, then, Phule's thought expressed not only a drive for abolition of the caste system but also an explanation of how it arose and a theory of exploitation through which all of Indian culture and history were to be understood. Central to this was his "non-Aryan" theory.

Two points must be noted here. First, in any society upper-class ideologies can be distinguished from mass ideologies by the fact that they nearly always hold an organic and functionalist view of society, emphasizing the reconciliation of opposing interests in the common welfare and the harmonious interaction of the separate parts of society. In contrast, mass ideologies take a polarizing view. They focus on exploitation and its irreconcilable conflict of interests between different sections of society. In other words, they contain some doctrine of class conflict. From this viewpoint, the famous "Indian tendency to the reconciliation of opposites" is not a characteristic of the "Hindu mind" but of an elite ideology which sought in various ways to combine Eastern and Western traditions and to combine symbols popular with the masses with symbols representative of elite power, regardless of possible contradictions. Phule's thinking does not show any such harmonizing tendencies but was based on the principle that an irreconcilable contradiction existed between the Brahman elite and the non-Brahman masses. Because of this, any effort to achieve equality necessitated an attack on the privileges and position of the elite. It makes no more sense to accuse Phule of "hatred of Brahmins" on the grounds of this attack than it does to blame a Marxist for hatred of capitalism.

Second, Phule's theory of exploitation was focused on cultural and ethnic factors rather than economic or political ones. It is true that he was highly concerned with the economic and political aspects of exploitation, but the objective conditions of 19th century colonialism made it almost impossible to come to an adequate understanding of economic matters or to visualize political solutions. Therefore, the cultural and ethnic aspects of elite-mass relationships were emphasized; the elite was seen primarily as Brahmins whose dominant position in the caste system and a religiously justified monopoly of knowledge underlay their power; they were seen as aliens, descendants of Aryan invaders who had enslaved and divided the indigenous population by means of the caste system. This approach reflected a good deal of Indian reality, yet it was dangerously susceptible to the position that the acquisition of education by the masses (a "revolution in consciousness") and the replacement of the Brahman elite by an elite developed from the non-Brahman masses would be sufficient to achieve an equalitarian society. Thus, non-Brahman ideology after Phule developed mainly as a "cultural revolution-

ary” ideology which was never satisfactorily integrated either with the ideology of national revolution or the ideology of class revolution. Nevertheless, the question of culture was a crucial one, particularly as it related to the problem of nationality and particularly within a colonial context.

The driving power behind modern imperialist expansion has been the development of capitalism, yet colonialism has involved not simply economic exploitation but also cultural exploitation. It represents the domination of whole cultural groups or nationalities, specifically the domination of Asian and African peoples by white European nations. Even the working classes of the dominant nations are in some sense part of the colonial elite; even the bourgeoisie and upper classes of the colonized cultural groups are in some sense suppressed. The entire culture of the colonized people, their customs, literature, languages, religions, is downgraded by the colonial rulers. Therefore, an anti-colonial revolution is a national revolution, and involves a reaffirmation and a revitalization of the culture of the dominated nationalities.

But the problem is more complicated. In the West the primary political organizations of the past few centuries have been the nation state, the establishment of a sovereign, bureaucratic state based on one “nationality,” or a people uniform in culture, language, ethnic identity. In the non-Western world, however, colonialism both held out the nation state as an ideal and at the same time, made it impossible to achieve in practice. This was because the processes of colonialism have intensified the differences between groups within a single geographical territory (e.g., Hindus and Muslims in India) and intensified the worldwide movement of cultural-ethnic groups (Indians to Africa and the West Indies; Africans to the Americas; Chinese throughout Southeast Asia) to the point where the resulting “plural society” has made it impossible for the state to focus upon a single nationality. Colonialism has, in addition, intensified the differences between elites and masses, and therefore, between elite culture and mass culture, within a single ethnic group. Therefore, if the nation state is to be the goal of an anti-colonial revolution, the burning question then becomes: what is the nationality, and which is the national culture, that is to be the basis of the new state?

When the Indian upper castes and bourgeois elite dealt with this question, their answer was rather simple. They first accepted the political framework of the British Raj—all of India—as the basis for the state. They then identified the “nation” and the “national culture” as basically Hindu, as deriving from Vedic times and as fundamentally a creation of the Aryan people. And with this they tended to accept as an inherent part of their culture some form of *varnashrama dharma* and to relegate other Indian cultural traditions—non-Aryan, Muslim, tribal, low caste and peasant traditions—to a secondary and inferior position. And, as we have seen, they not only made use of high-caste religious symbols in their attempts to do mass organizing, they also made a crucial use of the “Aryan theory of race” in interpreting cultural traditions.

It is in this context of the question of Indian national culture that Phule’s writings must be understood. The Aryan theory was, first of all, a double-edged sword, and Phule took it up with vigor. So, the elite were tracing cultures, including *varnashrama dharma*, from Aryan conquerors—then they were the descendants of foreigners and their caste system and religion were inventions devised by foreign conquerors to enslave the natives of India. India, and especially Maharashtra, had been ruled by aliens not simply for the centuries of British and Muslim rule, but for thousands of years before that! The masses, from peasants through tribals and untouchables, were the original inhabitants of India, the “sons of the soil;” the elites and particularly the Brahmins, the *Irani Arya-bhats*, were aliens; the choice between British and Congress elite rule was seen as a choice between two sets of foreigners, one enlightened, the other tradition-bound. Upper-caste, orthodox and the whole culture of the sacred books, from the Vedas through the Puranas, was seen by Phule not simply as superstition but as alien and as a weapon of rule.

The sacred religious literature was reinterpreted to show how the invading Aryans had conquered the indigenous people through force, treachery and use of religious propaganda. The nine *avatars* of Vishnu were seen as different stages of Aryan conquest. Matsya (the fish) and Kaccha (the tortoise) represented invasion by sea; Varah (the boar) was so-called because the original Aryans were seen as barbarians by the more civilized native Kshatriyas. The story of Narsinh (the lion-man) and Prahlad represented conquest by treachery and propaganda where the mind of a local prince was corrupted to the point where he was willing to kill his own father. Finally, Waman (the Brahman boy) represented a kind of culmination of the Aryan conquest of Maharashtra by cheating the great king Bali out of his kingdom. Phule did not, like the Tamil non-Brahmans, use the story of Ram to symbolize conquest of the south by the north, but the approach was the same. The *dasyus* or non-Aryans and the demons of the Vedas and Puranas were said to represent the indigenous population and were depicted as enlightened kings and warriors, the Aryans and their gods as treacherous invaders.

The culmination was Phule's emphasis on Bali-Raja, king Bali. This was in a sense his reply to the elite's use of Ram, Ganpati or Kali; it was a symbol that united Maharashtra peasant masses with the tales of Aryan invasions. Bali, as has been noted, was an ancient symbol for the peasant masses and, at the same time, represented a sort of golden age, expressed in the Marathi saying, *ida pida javo, Balica rajya yevo* ("let troubles and sorrows go and the kingdom of Bali come!"). Bali's kingdom, in addition, served as a focus around which positive interpretation of other peasant deities of Maharashtra were elaborated. That is, while Phule remained a rationalist, at the same time he had a favorable approach to such peasant deities as Khandoba, Jotirao, Marthand, Kalbhairav that contrasts with his hostility to the Sanskritic deities. Khandoba, for instance, is derived from the title of the official in charge of the nine *khand*, or parts, of Bali's kingdom; Mhasoba from *maha-subha* ("great province") and so on.

The purpose of this interpretation was not so much to provide a full history of India as to give a viewpoint from which such a history could be understood, to develop a nationalist ideology from a mass point of view. The "non-Aryan theory" was intended to establish a cultural and racial basis for the unity of the non-Brahman masses. This was a unity that more or less excluded Chitpavan Brahmins, (he saw Deshastha Brahmins as coming from the Shudras but co-opted) but did positively identify the peasant majority (the middle-level castes of Kunbis, Malis, Dhangars, artisans, etc.) with untouchables and tribals as one community. While Phule did not write in terms of "Dravidians" nor try to theoretically establish a Maratha regional nationalism, his approach was nevertheless in the same direction as the theories developed later in the context of the Tamil non-Brahman movement.

The non-Aryan theory, however, proved somewhat of an embarrassment to many of Phule's later Maharashtrian followers, for two reasons. First, the whole idea of ethnic conflict between Aryans and non-Aryans was de-emphasized, not only because the issue of actual racial mixing was recognized as a complex one, but also because of a need to assert a Hindu national unity. Second, the middle castes of Maharashtra, in the caste conferences of the 20th century and under the leadership of the educated and rich among them, chose instead to identify themselves as Kshatriyas and with this, as basically of Aryan and northern descent. Phule's approach came to be ignored, therefore, and dismissed with the statement that he was, after all, not a historian; the concepts of "slavery," "shudra" and "non-Aryan" came to be applied primarily to untouchables and tribals; and many modern Maharashtrian non-Brahmans have accepted the general north Indian identification of the Dravida Munnetra Kazagam (of Tamil Nadu, South India; DMK) ideology as basically "racist."

However, the issue was not a racial one but a cultural one, a matter of group identity. As has been noted, even the 19th century national leaders who argued that "Aryan and non-Aryan"

did not represent a racial division, still accepted the inferiority of non-Aryans. Similarly, the 20th century representatives of “Hindu nationalism” argue for the unity of all Hindus, but at the same time assert that the center of this “Hindu culture” is Vedic, i.e., Aryan and upper caste. Under the assertion of unity, division and hierarchy continued to be fostered.

In fact, there are varying cultural traditions in India as well as complicated racial intermixtures. The question of what is to be seen as the center of a “national culture” remains crucial. If the emphasis is toward Sanskritic Hinduism, Vedic culture, Vedant philosophy, Mahabharata and Ramayana stories, this implies a bias that is socially in favor of the upper castes and towards indirect support of the caste system; and geographically, in favor of north India. If the emphasis is towards non-Vedic culture, towards peasant traditions and tribal traditions, towards traditions of religious-cultural revolt running through Buddhism and the Bhakti cults, then the bias is socially in favor of the masses and geographically in favor of the outlying linguistic regions of India. In scholarship and nationalist thinking the bias up to now has been towards a Sanskritic and therefore elite basis to Indian culture, but in fact non-Sanskritic traditions have as much claim to an all-India spread. Since the whole question of Indian cultural identity is in many ways still an open one, in the process of formation in the context of social struggles, Phule’s “non-Aryan” version of Maharashtrian identity remains extremely relevant.

Tamil Nadu represents, of course, one section of India where the issue has been decided in favor of a non-Aryan national culture as a result of a non-Brahman movement much akin to that in Maharashtra. Maharashtra has developed no such nationalism, yet in some ways it remains a more crucial and open case. While in Tamil Nadu, a Dravidian language and literature as well as an extremely southern location provided an unambiguous foundation for a non-Aryan identification, in Maharashtra the choice between “Aryan” and “non-Aryan” has been, to a much greater degree, the choice between elite and mass cultural traditions. Thus Brahmins, especially Chitpavans, could be unambiguously characterized as non-natives, untouchables and tribals as non-Aryan natives, but there is a wide range of middle castes whose position is more ambiguous. For such castes to emphasize an Aryan and Kshatriya identity is to express a high status and a belongingness to northern and Vedic traditions that separates them from the low castes and untouchables of Maharashtra. It is no accident that the latter tendency became dominant at a time when the non-Brahman movement was splitting into the untouchable upsurge led by Ambedkar and a drive of caste Hindus (primarily Marathas) for political power. On the other hand, when Phule chose to emphasize the “non-Aryan” identity of the majority peasant castes of Maharashtra, he was rejecting elite and aristocratic traditions and asserting their unity with low castes, untouchables and tribals. He was also, it may be noted, asserting a unity with other oppressed peoples throughout the world; it is no accident that he dedicated *Gulamgiri* to the abolition of slavery in the United States:

to the Good People of the United Sates as a token of admiration for their sublime disinterested and self-sacrificing devotion in the case of Negro Slave; and with an earnest desire, that my countrymen may take their noble example as their guide in the emancipation of their Shudra brethren from the trammels of Brahmin thrallodom.

*(Keer 1969, p. 68)*

Phule was thus one of the few Indians of his time to identify with black Americans.

It is no wonder, then, that Phule’s interpretations of the Aryan–non-Aryan conflict occurs in practically all of his writings. This theory was central to his concept of the exploitation of the masses; it provided a concrete basis upon which the caste system could be attacked as non-Indian; and it was an attempt to provide a framework within which a theory of Maharashtrian “democratic national culture” could be built.

## Economic and political dilemmas

Because thought reflects social reality, not only do the elements of a particular ideology reflect the interest of a particular class or group within society, but in addition, the degree of sophistication in the development of theory also reflects the organizational and institutional development of these classes. In analyzing Phule's economic and political views, it is necessary not only to consider the conflict of interests between the largely Brahman elite and the masses, but also the specific problems of mass organizational development in a colonial situation.

By the second half of the 19th century, the Indian elite had reached a position where they could meet their Western rulers on near-equal terms in developing social theory and a "political economy" from an Indian point of view. Western education, the formation of new associations, newspapers and journals, the beginnings of political organizing, all provided a basis of social institutions around which thinking could be developed and theories exchanged. This was hardly possible for the colonized masses, whose organizational and ideological weakness relative to their own elite was much more marked than in Western industrial nations. Even workers could hardly form their own organizations or deal with their employers and the government without the mediation of literate and English-knowing outsiders; for peasants, who formed the vast majority, autonomous organization was impossible. They were in the position of being affected by the vagaries of a worldwide capitalist system while possessing only traditional institutions with which to cope. Thus, peasant rebellions might occur, but organizational forms could not be sustained.

The same was true in the field of ideology. Here it was necessary not only to be literate, but to be literate in a foreign language in order to utilize the most advanced thinking for the understanding of the causes and remedies of the poverty of the Indian masses. And this was necessary because, in fact, imperialism had established an organic connection between the "backwardness" of non-Western peasants and the "development" of the West. But few people of mass origin got any education at all; the tendency was for even those to be co-opted by the Brahmanized elite and to yield to the class status their education made possible; non-Brahman organizational and institutional development was slow—two or three newspapers by the turn of the century could provide only a small base for the exchange and development of ideas. Thus, however much a "peasant" or "mass" viewpoint might exist, however strong the contacts of non-Brahman leaders were with the masses, the social institutional basis for developing this into a sophisticated theoretical analysis did not exist.

The work of Phule and his colleagues has to be understood in this context. Phule's own writings reflect the sporadic nature of non-Brahman organizational development: They are unsystematic, sporadic, pictorial rather than discursive, hard-hitting but designed more to shock people into an awareness of the situation than to provide an extensive analysis. As he noted in the introduction to *Sarvajanik Satya Dharma*, he had wanted to write a more thorough book but felt it was more important for the book to be useful to the daily life of the people. Non-Brahman leaders in general thought it was more important to speak to the masses than to engage in finely spun analysis. Thus, Phule is not so much involved in providing a systematic and political theory or writing Indian history as giving a viewpoint, a beginning, a foundation.

Yet, his writings include not only heart-rending descriptions of peasant poverty, not only poetry and propaganda, but discussions of the causes and remedies of such poverty. These may not be systematic, but they contain a basic logic, and they reflect the dilemmas of the Indian masses of the time. Further, since both the weaknesses as well as the strengths of Phule's outlook became part of the general heritage of the non-Brahman movement, it is important to understand his position.

Phule's economic outlook might be summarized by saying that while the Indian nationalist elite developed a theory of Indian backwardness as a result of colonial exploitation, Phule and his colleagues saw the peasant masses as toiling under a double exploitation—that of the Brahman elite as well as that of the feudal rulers. And while the elite viewed industrialization as the primary solution to Indian problems and took their stand with the emerging capitalist class, Phule focused on the problems of agriculture and spoke from the viewpoint of the peasants.

Phule repeated much of the nationalists' economic critique of British rule. Unlike some of the later non-Brahman leaders who maintained an unqualified loyalty to the Raj, he seems to have viewed it as largely destructive in economic terms; it was only on cultural grounds that he saw it as providing a foundation for the liberation of the masses. Thus, he linked peasant poverty to the ruin of Indian crafts by unfair competition with British factory goods, to the disastrous growth of population, to the expense of foreign military campaigns, to excessive spending on fat salaries for bureaucrats. He described with scorn the decadent lifestyle of British officials and their neglect of the peasants and noted that even the common British soldier lived like an aristocrat at the expense of the masses. Like the nationalists, he viewed the "bureaucracy" as the primary enemy of the peasants, but where he differed from the nationalists was in seeing the bureaucracy as a whole, led at the top by the British but dominated at other levels by the native Brahman elite. In fact, one of his major criticisms of the British was that in leading their pleasure-seeking life they acquiesced in Brahman dominance. In every department—education, irrigation, the judiciary—Brahmans were seen as monopolizing the benefits of rule. In particular, the exploitation of the peasants by the incompetent, corrupt judiciary was heavily attacked. While nationalists criticized the "drain" of wealth from India to England, Phule and such colleagues of his as Bhalekar directed their attention to the "drain" from the peasantry to the urbanized bureaucratic elite, and criticized such taxes as the octroi, which provided a major amount of municipal income, and the local fund, by means of which largely upper-caste students were educated at the expense of the peasantry.

The primary conflict in India was thus described as a conflict between the peasantry and the elite-dominated bureaucracy. Zamindars in this area of *ryotwari* settlement were more or less viewed as irrelevant. *Shetjis* and *bhatjis* were to be coupled later as enemies of the peasantry but Phule's antagonism was greater towards the *bhats*. *Shetjis* or moneylenders oppressed the peasants through indebtedness, but it was felt that they could only gain power as a result of support from the bureaucracy. Brahmins or *bhatjis* were often landlords and moneylenders themselves; through religious domination they kept the peasants ignorant and subjugated; and finally, they had social and kin ties all up and down the bureaucratic hierarchy. It was this bureaucracy that was the source of power, and at its bottom, linking it with the village, was the Brahman *kulkarni*, whose power over the ignorant peasantry provided the linchpin of exploitation.

Phule did not give consideration to the issue of economic differentiation within the peasantry, to class differences of rich and poor peasants, small landholders and agricultural laborers. In one sense he cannot be faulted for this, since it was not until the 20th century and the work of Lenin and Mao that Marxists themselves elaborated an analysis of class differentiation among the peasantry and relations of production in a backward, colonized agriculture. However, Phule's thought was in some ways pre-industrial. For example, though his own colleague Narayanrao Lokhande was one of the first Indian spokesmen for labor, problems of industry and the working class, the question of property relations still did not enter into Phule's thought in a systematic form.

Industrialization was not seen by Phule as a solution to Indian backwardness. In a primarily agricultural country, he felt, the remedy for mass poverty lay in a direct solution of the agrarian problem. Thus, he urged extensive action by the government for the improvement of agricul-

ture, including soil conservation, the construction of tanks, bunds and dams, scientific programs of animal breeding, the specific education of peasants to create a class of instructors to teach modern techniques of agriculture in every village and so on. This was consistent with his general opposition to “trickle-down” theories of progress—that is, he did not feel that economic or educational benefits to a small section would eventually result in overall social progress. This general outlook has been justified in that limited industrial development in many capitalist underdeveloped countries, has only increased contradictions between rich and poor and between cities and rural areas. However, perhaps because of his lack of concern for economic differentiation among the peasantry, he did not foresee that even the benefits of some agricultural development might not easily flow from a rural elite to the rural masses.

These limitations of Phule’s thinking were of course related to 19th century conditions: Industrialization had scarcely begun; the working class was insignificant; agricultural development had not provided a solid base for a rich peasant class to emerge. All of these were to become problems for his followers, later non-Brahman leaders, to cope with; and to cope with them they would have to take Phule’s basic viewpoint—a lively awareness of exploitation and a concern for equality and direct mass development—as the foundation for an analysis that would go beyond Phule’s own. But, on the whole, this was not done.

Politically, Phule’s view of the double exploitation of the peasantry left him with an almost insoluble problem. How could an unorganized, illiterate and still mentally enslaved peasantry fight two enemies at once? It was not simply that the Sarvajanik Sabha and the National Congress of Phule’s time were overwhelmingly dominated by the Brahman elite; it was also that he could not visualize the possibilities of any freedom movement, in his time or the future, that would not come under elite control. And to a large degree, this was a realistic assessment. Even in the 20th century, periods of mass mobilization that drew in extensive mass participation and peasant leadership to the National Congress were followed by periods of organizational consolidation that saw the reaffirmation of upper-class control. Non-Brahman entry into the Congress coincided with the disappearance of the Satyashodhak Samaj, yet non-Brahman leaders did not gain control of the Congress organization until after independence. By that time, the fervor of social reform and cultural revolution had dissipated.

In the choice between British rule and Brahman organizational dominance, Phule opted for British rule as the best guarantee of the conditions under which the masses could progress. In one sense, he had no other choice. (And he was after all no simple supporter of the British; in 1880 for instance, he was the single member of the Poona Municipality to oppose the spending of Rs1,000 for the Viceroy’s visit.) In another sense, it reflected a failure in his analysis, a yielding to the illusion of benevolence which the British put forth. He was perfectly aware of the continuation of Brahman power under British rule, yet he never linked this to an analysis of colonialism as a system that depended on such intermediary elites to maintain itself. Therefore, he was caught in the position of asking the British to institute changes which, as a colonial government, they had neither the will nor the power to carry out. This could be illustrated in his own demands. He wanted mass education rather than “trickle down” education. But the British did not have the financial resources nor the desire to carry this out, and the very purpose of colonial education was to train the intermediary elite of bureaucrats which Phule opposed. He wanted British civil servants and investigatory commissions to heed the testimony of mass representatives rather than the elite; but he was more aware than any nationalist leader that however much the British pretended to be protectors of the peasants; in fact, they were far removed from any sharing of life or interests with the masses. He was asking for an impossibility.

Phule wanted sweeping changes within village society itself. His primary goal was not simply to replace a Brahman-dominated bureaucracy with a non-Brahman bureaucracy, and it was

not simply to transfer power to the villages. Rather he wanted to revolutionize village society. Not only should the position of *kulkarni* be abolished, but also the *patils* and other *watan* posts should be opened up to all on the basis of merit through special training schools. Thus, the entire *balutedar* system with its relation to traditional caste privileges and functions was to be destroyed along with the hereditary linking of caste and occupation. Similarly, the traditional moral and social life of the masses had to be drastically reformed. Phule urged a strong legislation of morality that would prohibit bigamy, child marriage and concealed prostitution in the form of *kolhatins* and *tamashas*. The equality of women, as well as the equality of untouchables, demanded sweeping changes in society.

But what type of government could carry through such sweeping changes? Such a program, even though it did not directly refer to economic inequalities within the village, nevertheless involved a revolutionary attack on traditional social arrangements. Therefore, it projected a revolutionary state. It required a type of political organization that was as far removed from the capitalist or colonial *laissez-faire* state as it was from traditional government by caste and social custom.

The British were, after all, by policy, reluctant to attack the traditional customs of Indian society. They were unwilling to attack the privileges of the elite because they depended on this elite for the maintenance of the Raj. In a colonial situation, the relation of Western rulers with the native elite is an ambiguous one involving not only conflicts of interest but also compromises and a sharing of power. The problem was not simply that Phule was petitioning the government for reforms; the style of the “nationalist” elite in this period was also one of petitioning, compromise, negotiations. The Congress was by no means a revolutionary body. But there was an important difference between petitioning for elite reforms and for mass demands. Elite reforms—up to and including the granting of a “neocolonial” regime in which a “national bourgeoisie” would have significant power—could be conceded by the British after a period of agitation and compromise. But the mass demands for sweeping social revolution, heavy expenditure on educational and agricultural development, could not be given. Phule’s petitioning was therefore contradictory in a way that elite petitioning was not.

The basic goal was revolutionary change from the very base of the society. If the British could not carry this out, who would? Phule’s other attempt to provide a solution was to look to the development of a non-Brahman elite who would implement such changes. Brahman positions, he argued, should be limited to their percentage of the population and non-Brahmans should be associated with the government at all levels. This was seen not as an end, but as a means. It was based on the belief that a non-Brahman educated elite would continue to have family and cultural ties with the masses that would limit their ability and willingness to exploit them as the Brahmins did. Yet Phule was aware that educated non-Brahmans of his day also tended to be co-opted into accepting the caste hierarchy and “Brahmanic” values and that they were susceptible to nationalist appeals for unity with elite rather than unity with the peasant masses against the elite. What would ensure that this would not happen on a larger scale? This question was never fully answered.

### **Conclusion: A heritage of social revolution unfulfilled**

The contradictions in the economic and political program of Phule and his colleagues were in fact inherent in the condition of a peasantry under colonial rule. But they were transmitted as part of a heritage of a developing “non-Brahman movement” that did represent the social revolutionary drive of the Maharashtrian masses. Phule’s greatest contribution was in his rigorous cultural revolutionary stand, his drive for equality and rationality, and in the creation of an

organization, the Satyashodhak Samaj, which would carry on agitation for social and religious reform at a mass level. However, his followers remained unable to coordinate this cultural revolution with a consistent economic and political program. Faced by a situation where the colonial government could not and would not carry out a program of social revolution and where an elite-dominated national movement wanted to arouse mass participation without letting it get out of control, leaders of the non-Brahman movement never managed to create or help to create an organization to oppose both government and elite. In such a situation, they yielded to the temptation to focus on the means (the creation of a non-Brahman elite drawn from the villages) to the exclusion of the ends (the transformation of village society itself).

Thus, in the legislative councils, non-Brahman leaders sought to achieve the opening up of bureaucratic positions to non-Brahmans, to hasten the process of transforming the *watandar kulkarni* into a *talathi* and to eradicate the hereditary rights of the village priests. At the same time, they sponsored *patil* conferences and many resisted the attempts of Ambedkar to end the Mahar *watan*. Phule's concern for a revolution of equality in personal relationships—between men and women, among the different castes, within village society and family itself—tended to be neglected. The result was that the shift in power toward rural society meant a shift to an unrevolutionized village dominated by a rural elite. Thus, the educational institutions founded by non-Brahman leaders and the agricultural cooperatives which had their beginnings at the time of the movement, began to provide an institutional basis of the consolidation of the power of this elite. And with this consolidation, traditional culture and elite power based on the new caste hierarchy retained their hold on rural society.

In this situation, by the 1930s, the non-Brahman movement was merged with the national movement, but the former Satyashodhak leaders never succeeded in transforming the national revolution into a social revolution. Militant young non-Brahmans, turning to nationalism and alienated by the Brahman leadership of the Communist Party accused the loyalist non-Brahmans of giving up social revolutionary goals in exchange for elite positions under the British, but they themselves neglected these goals in the process of mass mobilization and acquisition of power within the Congress organization. Phule's overriding concern for social revolution and the awareness of the inherent conflict between the exploited masses and the educated and wealthy elite was compromised as non-Brahmans began to form a significant part of that elite. In the very period in which non-Brahmans joined Congress, the most significant part of Phule's ideology, the emphasis on a "non-Aryan" cultural and ethnic unity of all the masses from the Kunbi-Maratha peasants to untouchables, was given up, and Phule's primary organization, the Satyashodhak Samaj, vanished as a vital force in village society.

None of these processes happened automatically. It is important to remember that Phule's thought was not the sole ideological influence upon the "non-Brahman movement," that the secularist radicals had to contend with more conservative and Sanskritizing versions in giving it shape, and that these versions were symbolized in the important role of the other influential founder of the movement, Shahu Chhatrapati, Maharaja of Kolhapur.

Phule's own thought and lifework has thus not yet found its fulfillment. The concept of a "non-Aryan" ethnic-cultural unity of all the masses and low castes remains an underlying theme; the call for a revolutionary, ruthless attack on the injustices of the old society can still be heard; the emphasis on social equality and rationalism gave a populistic, peasant-oriented and still modernistic theme of cultural revolt that did help to create the non-Brahman movement. It is significant that Phule himself, along with Ambedkar—one the son of a gardener, the other an untouchable—both of whom considered the Indian elite and not the British as the primary enemy of the masses, are among the most popular heroes of Maharashtra today. Nevertheless, while his thought remains one of the most important parts of the Maharashtrian cultural tradi-

tion, its cultural revolutionary drive has been dispersed and fragmented, still unrealized—reflecting perhaps the still fragmented and unorganized poverty of the rural masses, the hope of a liberation yet to be achieved.

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# 4

## RECLAIMING SAVITRIBAI PHULE

### Life and times of a forgotten liberator

*Nilekha Salunke*

*Wake up shudraatishudra brethren,  
Wake up from your slumber,  
Wake up to break the slavery of tradition,  
Wake up to educate and liberate!*

—Savitribai Phule

### Introduction

These are paradoxical times as far as knowledge production, reproduction, its circulation and reception in contemporary India are concerned. Our readings of nationalist times and also post-colonial India make it quite clear that Indian historiography has not lived up to its true creed since it has remained deeply biased and manipulative. “Biased” because it has failed to record and include in its narrative the voices of the marginalized majority which includes Dalits, Adivasis, Other Backward Classes (OBCs), Muslims, Sikhs, Christians and other excluded communities. It has failed to document the resistance of these communities toward the dominant “minority.” The available historiography pretends as if these marginalized communities have never contested the oppression to which they were subjected by the upper caste Brahminical hegemony. It also turns a blind eye to the available narratives or meta-narratives of the marginalized majority.

The manipulation of Indian historiography and its documentation which started during the colonial period continues to this day. It has been manipulative because the Brahminical caste ideology was and is termed as “national” and “Indian,” thus equating and advertising, quite cunningly, its own development with the development of the majority of the people, and its own modernization as the modernization of the whole nation. Colonial governance not only created a platform for upper-caste Brahminical dominance but also strengthened it in such a way that this dominance continues even today. So much so, that for the colonial masters, *Manusmriti* and the other *Dharmashatras* were the “constitutional guidelines” to govern the people of the land. Any rational person would not approve these scriptural “constitutional guidelines” that are filled with the choicest abuses, punishments and innumerable restrictions on the *toiling people* (a common term that we use to include the so-called Shudra, Ati-Shudra and women) so as to suppress and dominate them completely.

Yet, one may argue that this dominance has never been static; it has been dynamic and has changed from time to time. But this dynamism has not changed the power equation between the marginalized majority and dominant minority. From times immemorial, the main focus of the dominant minority is to cheat, mislead, exploit and suppress the majority. However, in recent times a serious challenge to this trend has evolved not only in academia but more importantly outside it, mainly among the people. Strong critiques of the Brahminical ideology and hegemony have gained ground, both of which percolate to every level of society with its institution of caste and caste-based hierarchy. Birth-based caste division not only fragmented Indian society but also provided its propagators a good platform to exploit the toiling majority for social, economic and political gains. Further, colonial rule used casteism and Brahmanism to strengthen its hold over the masses.

Alternative readings of nationalism such as G. Aloysius's *Nationalism without a Nation in India* interpret the monolithic Brahminic nationalism as basically a cunning creation of the Brahminical elites to misguide the majority for its own selfish purpose. Nevertheless, such a selfish and self-serving motive of the upper-caste Brahminical nationalism came under heavy attack from the leaders of the marginalized majority from the 19th century that includes colonial rule too. These anti-caste leaders, although they were divided by time, space and region, propagated against caste and its creation for the perpetuation of Brahminical hegemony. They were unanimous about the relatively more sinister character of Brahminical domination compared to colonial rule. As a result, annihilation of Brahminical domination emerged as the common agenda in their struggles.

### **Savitribai Phule**

In western India, Jotirao Phule and his wife, Savitribai Phule, were the first to wage a war against Brahminical domination, its culture, ideology and against the contentious nature of the Hindu religion per se. As we know, the Phule couple was born into the *Shudra-Ati-Shudra* (as used by Jotirao Phule in his times) group of Indian society. In our contemporary understanding Ati-Shudra would be Dalit and Shudra would be OBCs. The Phules belonged to the *Mali* (gardener) caste of Maharashtra which is defined as an OBC caste in contemporary India. The Phules are a unique couple as thinkers and are foremost among those who struggled for the emancipation of the *Shudra-Ati-Shudra* people.

While the focus of this chapter is Savitribai Phule, as we will see in the course of the discussion, it is not possible to read Savitribai in isolation since she was Jotirao's constant partner in his revolutionary frontal attack against the Brahminical ideology. Further, she derives her ideology from Jotirao. In order to understand her worldview it becomes obligatory for us to understand Jotirao Phule in the first place.

To understand Savitribai, one needs to attempt briefly a critical review of his revolutionary ideas. Amid high-caste opposition and obstacles, Phule established the first school for the Shudra-Ati-Shudra people in 1848. By 1855, he set up some more schools including one in 1851 for girls of all castes. Further, he threw open his well of drinking water for the untouchables. Phule was not merely a believer but a doer too. In 1860, he started his campaign for widow remarriage and invited the wrath of the Brahmins. According to G. P. Deshpande, for most of other reformers of his time, this subject was a matter of theory and reform. For Phule, it was a matter of praxis and revolution. Sequentially, Phule wanted to create a theoretical base for his practical activism.

This was substantiated with the publication of Phule's *Gulamgiri* (Slavery) in 1873. The book was a brutal attack on Brahmin orthodoxy, its cunningness and deceptive character. In a way, *Gulamgiri* was a prelude or official manifesto, if we like, to the establishment of *Satyashodak Samaj* (Society of Truth-seekers) on September 24, 1873. If we were to summarize Phule's world of

ideas, one would imagine—more or so after reading two of his most important books *Gulamgiri* and *Shetkaryacha Asud* (Cultivator's Whipcord)—that it revolves around dharma and caste. Phule does not use the words “Hindu” or “Hinduism.” He directs his anger against Brahmanism instead. Further, he proposes a dichotomous conception of society when he addresses this binary group through their Varna names: Brahman and Shudra-Ati-Shudra. Phule’s writing is primarily subversive rather than objective because it attempts to subvert the existing history. To be precise, it turns history on its head and shows the other side of the coin. It would be more fitting to call him a revolutionary and social reformer. Revolutionary because he had an alternate world-view which was opposed to the existing structure of Indian society, a worldview in which the Shudra-Ati-Shudra could claim their subjective identity and lead a revolution for the betterment of the whole society.

How does Savitribai fit into all this? What was her role in the revolutionary struggle led by Jotirao Phule? What is her contribution to this emancipatory struggle of Shudra-Ati-Shudra? How does she manage to carve out an independent identity for herself? What are the specific questions that she raised in her times? How did she answer these questions? What is her contemporary standing as a thinker in modern India? These are some of the questions that this chapter will address.

The discussion could begin with the last question first. It is sad that most historians of Marathi literature do not refer to Savitribai Phule. Apart from two or three attempts of biographical sketches, there is no serious commentary on Savitribai’s life and works. According to a generalized estimate, about 200 books have been collectively written on Jotirao and Savitribai in the Marathi language apart from a handful of attempts in other Indian languages such as Telugu, Kannada, Punjabi, Urdu, Gujarati, etc. Out of these, about 40 books have been written on Savitribai corresponding to both her literary and non-literary works. But the work which stands out and is now considered as an authority on the biographical and literary/non-literary achievements of Savitribai is M. G. Mali’s *Krantijyoti Savitribai Phule* published in 1980 and K. P. Deshpande’s *Agniphule* in 1982. Subsequent books and reports published on Savitribai contain nothing new. And quite sadly, there is not a single critical analysis of Savitribai’s life and works as we have now (though very few) in the case of Jotirao Phule. Could this be attributed to gender bias, the very same bias that the Phules struggled against throughout their lives? Savitribai worked shoulder to shoulder with Jotirao in his “polemical” struggle against social evils operating in the society and yet she is denied a rightful place in history. This academic lacuna needs to be seriously addressed, at least in the Marathi language. One of the few attempts to give Savitribai her due includes the book by Mani and Pamela (2008) entitled *A Forgotten Liberator: The Life and Struggle of Savitribai Phule*. However, this book too is not an exhaustive account of Savitribai because it only refers to a few of her selected writings, primarily her letters and some poems. A far more serious attempt to bring out Savitribai’s contribution is *Women Writing in India*, edited by Susie Tharu and K. Lalita in two volumes. It is one of the crucial contributions to discuss and analyze women’s writing in India. In this book also Savitribai is discussed but the discussion is limited, which perhaps can be explained by the fact that the work was an ambitious attempt to include as many women writers as possible, ranging from ancient times to modern period.

The post-Mandal Commission period brought caste debate to the forefront and created a kind of churning both in academia and political circles. This is best reflected in how the post-graduate literature departments of Indian universities were compelled to accommodate the marginalized voices, especially of the Dalits and subaltern narratives as a part of their teaching material in the late 1990s. Further, the University Grants Commission (UGC) established specific study centers or “advanced centers” for the study of the writings of writers from the hitherto marginalized communities. The establishment of women’s studies centers in almost all the major universities of India was part of this development.

It should be noted that now in all Indian universities it has become a trend to offer the course on “feminism” especially to those students who opt for language and literature at the post-graduate level. It is a welcome step because traditionally “feminism” remained within the disciplines of Sociology and Women’s Studies. But the teaching material selected for these courses is a bone of contention. Quite often, the feminism courses in Indian universities are taught from the Western feminist point of view. This is not to undermine the contribution of Western feminism, but one wonders why the Indian women (it is not necessary to tag them as feminist) thinkers are left out?

A case in point: Pune is the place where Savitribai worked all her life, along with her revolutionary husband. We were never introduced to Savitribai Phule’s life and writings during our school days. During my Masters at the University of Pune’s Department of English, I opted for a course on feminism for two successive semesters. Yet there was not a word on Savitribai Phule. If this is the state of affairs at Pune University, what can we expect from other parts of the country? While developing this chapter, just for the sake of my own curiosity, I checked the syllabus of the courses on “feminism” and women’s studies of most of the universities in Maharashtra and outside it. Savitribai Phule and her works were missing from most syllabi. One can only wonder how there could be classes and discussion on women’s writing in universities in Maharashtra without any mention of such pioneers as Savitribai Phule, Muktabai and Kashibai Kanitkar, among others. One reason perhaps the dominant reason could be the lack of material on these women thinkers. For instance, Savitribai is very much a part of Maharashtra’s oral narratives, but unfortunately she has never been a part of the academic narratives. Is this exclusion deliberate? One wonders. It was natural that Savitribai faced exclusion and humiliation both from writers and critics of the day and later, for being an equal partner in Jotirao’s fight against Brahmins and Brahminism. The hatred against the Phule couple has continued until today and it was so intense that until recently no intellectual from the mainstream either wrote their biographies or discussed their social message. In this chapter, we make out a case for the inclusion of Savitribai and her thinking in the mainstream discourse. But first there is a need to theorize and critically introduce her writings and ideas.

### **Early life and education**

The name “Savitribai” has roots in Marathi or the Prakrit form of Sanskrit. The word “savitri” means “relating to the sun” whereas “bai” is an affectionate and respectful Maharashtrian suffix attached to the main name of a woman meaning “mother.” After her marriage to Jotirao Phule in 1840, in keeping with the Maharashtrian tradition, she became Savitribai Jotirao Phule. But in most of her writing she wrote her name as Savitri Jotirao.

There is no reliable date of birth available for Savitribai Phule. She is supposed to have been born in Naigaon village in Satara district to Laxmibai and Khandaji Nevase Patil on January 3, 1831. Savitri was the eldest daughter of her parents and got married to 13-year-old Jotirao Phule at the age of nine. Savitribai’s orientation was that of an ordinary Hindu girl from a rural background when she first entered the house of Phule. She realized Jotirao’s depth of thinking once she started to live with him. Jotirao had this habit of sharing his field experiences as well as the information he garnered from his extensive reading of books on the human condition with his wife Savitribai and Sagunabai, who was Jotirao’s maternal cousin, who raised him after the early death of his mother (Suryavanshi 2006).<sup>1</sup> Hearing him hold forth, Savitribai nursed the hope that her husband would write books like Thomas Paine’s *Rights of Man* and become a man of fame. It needs to be mentioned here that Savitribai was illiterate at the time of her marriage. There was no concept of education for Shudra-Ati-Shudra and much less for women of these

communities in the prevailing Brahminical caste ideology which sanctioned education only for Brahmins and a handful of upper-caste communities.

Scholars such as Uma Chakravarti and Sharmila Rege have, through their research and writing, proved that caste is predominantly patriarchal in nature and the gendered notion of social behavior is produced through it. This social behavior, in turn, treats a woman as merely “a thing of possession.” The Hindu scriptures contain several anti-women statements such as *na stri swaatantryam arhati* (women do not deserve any kind of freedom) and *striyo hi mool doshanaam* (women are the root cause of all evil). The condition of women was as bad as that of Shudras and Ati-shudras. Theoretically speaking, as formulated by Jotirao Phule, Indian society was marked by a two-fold division. One was that of elites, who followed and propagated Brahminical caste ideology and the other was of *Stri-Shudra-Ati-Shudra*, the subordinated majority on whom the hegemonic Brahminical caste ideology was imposed. We can further formulate that this two-fold division not only existed in exclusion but also in mutual conflict against each other. Paulo Freire took cognizance of this mutual conflict in his work entitled *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and formulated that the ideology that serves the interest of one group undermines the interest of another. However, the group whose interest is undermined may not always accept that status as de facto. In fact, history is filled with examples where the oppressed have mobilized themselves and challenged the social conditions of living imposed by the dominant/elite group. The story of Savitribai’s education is one such example of resistance and challenge to the prevailing denial of education for the majority in society.

One day, Jotirao Phule returned home in anger and when asked for the reason of his anger, he narrated how he was humiliated by the orthodox Brahmins who opposed his presence in the marriage procession of Jotirao’s close friend who was a Brahmin. Jotirao was recognized as a low-caste person and he was told that he had no place in the wedding procession. An angry Jotirao left the procession. This incident served as a catalyst that motivated him to fight against the hatred, discrimination and injustice of the caste Hindus towards the common masses. He understood how the self-assigned superiority and the resultant arrogance was responsible for the suppression and marginalization of women and Shudra-Ati-Shudras, their exploitation in the name of religion and superstitions. He was convinced that this social disease could be fought only through education and awareness. Therefore, he decided to ensure that women and Shudra-Ati-Shudras would get an education so that they could free themselves from the slavery of Brahmins and usher in a just social system. Jotirao shared his thoughts with Savitribai, his determination to struggle against the unjust social structure and dedicate his life to the upliftment of the Shudra-Ati-Shudra people and their welfare. He asked Savitribai to support him in this cause to which she agreed without hesitation.

Jotirao and Savitribai decided to build public schools for the marginalized which was the first revolutionary decision of that time as education was not only in the hands of Brahmins but was also limited to Brahmins. He accepted an offer by a friend of his, Sadashivrao Govande, who invited him to go to Ahmednagar to see how missionary schools were run. Jotirao met Mrs Farar who ran a missionary school for women in Ahmednagar and spent time with her to understand the syllabus and activities for women students. She explained why it was important to get women educated. She said, “A woman is the central point of any household. If she is educated, then the situation of a whole family changes drastically. It is really very sad that you people do not teach your own wives.”

She readily agreed to help him with his project of starting a school for girls. But she said any reform should start from the house of the reformers. She said:

For the first time somebody like you has come up with a thought of opening up of schools for girls and women in India. We have decided that we will completely help

you out in this cause but you must start this mission of women's education from your house itself. Any reformation that starts from our own house lasts for longer time. Your aunt and wife both of them are intelligent and clever; you must teach them first and make them capable. They will not come in between you and your noble cause and they will be your supporters in this great work.<sup>2</sup>

And thus the education of Savitribai and Saganabai started, first at home and later in a school run by Mrs Michel. Further, archival records suggest that Jotirao and some of his companions, namely Sakharam Yeshwant Paranjpe and Keshav Shivram Bhavalkar, continued to teach Savitribai for a period of time until she joined as a regular teacher. Thus, it would be correct to say that Savitribai Phule is India's first professionally trained woman teacher. We should consider this event as an "alternative suggestion" for the rise of Stri-Shudra-Ati-Shudra. In those days, a woman stepping out of her house for education was unimaginable. Savitribai's case not only turned out to be a prelude to women's education and liberation in India but also paved the way for her entry from a "caged" personal sphere to a liberated public sphere which was until that time completely monopolized by the Brahminical patriarchy.

### **Revolutionary beginnings: Opening of schools for women and Shudra-Ati-Shudra**

In all probability, the year 1848 was a revolutionary year in the history of human civilization. On an international map, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels brought out the *Communist Manifesto*, a manuscript which for the first time attempted a scientific analysis of class struggle and argued that "the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle," a formulation which has altered and heavily influenced our modern-day approach towards all relations. In America too an intense movement was on its way for the liberation of women. The first-ever convention for women's rights was called at Seneca Falls, New York, from July 19 to July 20, 1848. It was conceived by a few women who were involved in the abolition and temperance movements. The convention, attended by about 300 people including 40 men, unanimously passed resolutions against the unfair treatment of women and their subjugation. While the women on the world stage were looking at the intersection of liberation and equality, the "Hindu" woman was in perpetual oppression and was compelled to live an invisible social life. The first structural change to this status was initiated by the Phules and the weapon which they quite fittingly used was that of mass education.

Jotirao Phule and Savitribai resolved to find the way to social reform through the path of education in Maharashtra. Savitribai became the first teacher and headmistress of the school that Phule started. The couple had decided that the education of girls and of Shudra-Ati-Shudra was more important than any other thing at that time. According to Jotirao: "The low castes, Mahars, Mangs, Chambhars, etc. composing a great part of my countrymen, being sunk deep in ignorance and misery, the Lord was pleased to excite in me a desire to better their conditions through means of education." Regarding girls' schools he observed that he found them to be even more necessary than schools for boys, the root of education lying in "the proper turn mothers give to the disposition of children between their second and third years." Furthermore, in an interview given to *Dyananodaya* on September 15, 1853, Jotirao Phule said:

It did occur to me that the improvement that comes about in a child due to the mother is very important and good. So those who are concerned with the happiness and wel-

fare of this country should definitely pay attention to the condition of women and make every effort to impart knowledge to them if they want the country to progress.

With such noble thoughts in mind, the Phules opened their first school for girls on January 18, 1848, in Bhidewada at Pune. This school was the first of its kind, which was opened by a non-Brahmin for the sake of educating girls of the downtrodden Shudra-Ati-Shudra Bahujans. Jotirao's friends Sadashivrao Govande and Sadashiv Ballal helped them in starting the school. The Phules were in high spirits after the opening of their first school but orthodox Brahmins were disturbed by this act of "blasphemy." For these Brahmins, teaching women from the Shudra-Ati-Shudra community was against "natural" laws and therefore it was intentional corruption of their religion. In reality though, they were scared that their conspiracy of 4,000 years which resulted in inhuman suppression and humiliation of the common masses would come to the forefront and ultimately be challenged. They started shouting "wisdom is running towards the houses of Shudras." According to them, imparting knowledge to Shudra-Ati-Shudra people and women of all castes was not only against religion and society in general but also against the will of God. On top of it, the idea of educating women was worst kind of profanity they could imagine.

According to the Hindu scriptures and teachings of Manu, the lawgiver of the Hindus, women should not get education and freedom as they are deceitful and cunning by nature. If educated, they will surely ruin their family and future generations. The idea of an educated woman was a nightmare for the Brahminical patriarchy since they imagined that a liberated woman could not be controlled and that would result in her running amok in terms of sexual desires. Overall, the dominant Brahminical ideology attempted to create a picture in which an educated woman was perceived to be "dangerous" for society. In the prevailing norms of those days, women were not allowed to wear slippers. The use of an umbrella was perceived as a challenge to male supremacy and masculinity. She was not even allowed to have a dialogue with her husband in front of elders. We can go on and on about the restrictions imposed on women and the list will be endless. Therefore, the orthodox Brahmins in Pune tried every method they could think of to stop Jotirao and Savitribai from their noble act of teaching the oppressed people.<sup>3</sup>

We know from Dhananjay Keer's account of Jotirao's life that this group of orthodox cunning Brahmins tried to stop Jotirao's education several times by threatening and misleading Jotirao's father Govindrao Phule, but Jotirao succeeded in defeating them by completing his education. Savitribai went to Mrs Farar at Ahmednagar to complete her training as a teacher and then practiced her skills at the Pune government school. By all accounts, it is now proved that the Phules opened their first school for girls, Dalit-Bahujan and minority Muslim students in 1848 which was discontinued for some time and was restarted in 1851. The couple gave utmost importance to inclusiveness and consciously made efforts to bring girls of such communities as Mangs and Mahars who were structurally and historically marginalized. Clarifying his stance on the issue of education for Mangs and Mahars, Jotirao Phule said:

Ignorance, caste discrimination and discrimination based on language are the bane of this country. When everyone is sad the question often arises of whom to help. But instead of being paralyzed by this question into inaction, it is better to help those for whom the suffering is the most. The Mahars and Mangs have to suffer inevitably due to caste discrimination. They can only overcome this suffering through knowledge. So, I started work for them, having convinced myself that there was no greater good for the country than educating the Mangs and the Mahars.

On July 3, 1851, the Phules opened another school for girls. Angry Brahmins could not tolerate this act and the issue for them now became an issue of honor. They therefore targeted Vishnupant Thatte who was teaching with Jotirao and who was a Brahmin by caste. He was threatened with social boycott if he continued to teach in the Phules' schools. Vishnupant Thatte capitulated. Jotirao had to find a new teacher at short notice which was not easy. This crisis prompted Savitribai to offer to take Thatte's place in the school "from the next day." One should understand the general unfavorable climate in which Savitribai worked for the upliftment of girls and the other oppressed people of society. Pune had inherited a hostile legacy of caste and gender discrimination from the preceding Peshwa rule. In such a situation when a Shudra woman belonging to the gardener community becomes a teacher how could Brahmins digest it? The Brahmin orthodoxy tried all possible ways to prevent her from teaching. But the strong-willed Savitribai was not to be stopped. She did not look back and continued her work with vigor. Taking note of Savitribai's situation and her revolutionary zeal, Dhananjay Keer notes:

As he (Jotirao) could not get a teacher to help him, he took the help of his wife whom he had taught at home. A wave of uncontrollable excitement and anger swept over Poona. A woman going out of step with society and working as a teacher! An unholy, unheard of thing! An affront to national honour! The learned Brahmins and their henchlings hated the very sight of Savitri. They threw mud, dirt, stones at her when she was on her way to the school. Embarrassed by this unholy uproar and upsurge, she would stop in the street and say serenely to her persecutors, "God forgive you. I am doing my duty. May he bless you." It was after Savitribai Phule has appeared on the scene that Indian woman began to take part in public work.

(Keer 2000)

The enraged Brahmin orthodoxy would not take this affront lying down. They called her names, tried to stop her from going to school by throwing invectives at her as she walked down to the school. They threw stones and dung at her; some even spat betel leaf juice on her (Dhige 2010).<sup>4</sup> But these insults and humiliation by the Brahmins did not shake Savitribai's determination. On the other hand, they strengthened her determination and she remained unmoved by the violence. When the contemporary society was immersed in following the conventional rituals, child marriages, the tradition of Sati, shaving of heads of widows, reveling in superstitions, Savitribai was busy in making her own path that was far ahead of her time. Savitribai always supported the decisions of Jotirao and hence, she was not merely his wife but became an inspiration and a companion to him in all his work (Narke 2008).

Savitribai's persona was indeed revolutionary if we also take into account how women of that period were kept within the four walls of home. The clutches of tradition restricted them to household chores and rearing children. While most women accepted living in "patriarchal slavery" Savitribai Phule broke those walls of servitude and the shackles imposed on women, thereby creating a path for other women to walk. However, the Brahminical patriarchy would not give up so easily. The dominant caste is always a faithful servant of the social organization and rules since these are basically manufactured to serve their interests. Brahmins, the well-trained technicians in the art of social control, confronted Jotirao's father Govindrao Phule and applied immense pressure on him to keep the activities of the Phule couple under check. According to Keer:

They said to Govindrao with rage in their eyes, your son has been a disgrace to religion and society. So is his shameless wife. You are incurring the displeasure of God. In the name of religion and God we command you to stop him or drive him out!

Jotirao and Savitribai Phule tried to convince Govindrao regarding the importance of their work for the society did not succeed. Govindrao asked Jotirao to go wherever he wished but leave Savitribai behind, as being a woman, she may not be able to face the humiliation of society. Jotirao agreed to leave his father's house and Savitribai endorsed his decision. The event brings to the forefront Savitribai's individuality and support for Jotirao's cause. She too, like him, was a "rebel" and "tradition breaker." The Phules finally left Govindrao's house and as a result their school was also closed for some time, but they bounced back and started it again.

Intelligent, strong and a woman of substance, Savitribai continued her journey as a teacher and social reformer but not without her share of sufferings and troubles. They both denounced the existing status quo because they were aware that it was based on discrimination and treachery. According to them this discriminatory status quo can only be altered by changing the consciousness of those who are oppressed and at the same time creating a discourse which will reform the oppressors.

The opening of schools for women and Dalit-Bahujans was the first step in this direction. The doors of knowledge were thrown open to the lowest of the low for the first time. Savitribai was the first Indian woman to become the agent of this crucial change, a change which was nothing less than a paradigm shift from the earlier notions of discrimination and humiliation. A Shudra was not supposed to receive education. According to Manusmriti, if a Shudra hears the Vedas, molten lead should be poured in his ears. An Ati-Shudra getting education was unthinkable! Savitribai Phule was by no means an ordinary teacher. She directed her teaching at reforming society and upliftment of the subaltern. She encouraged the students to think rationally, question the status quo with logic and above all, allow the development of the mind. The task of Savitribai was hardly easy as a letter written by one of her students named Muktabai, aged 14, on the pathetic conditions of Mahars and Mangs (1855) and their resultant resistance, shows. It would be fitting to quote a part of this letter here:

The Brahmins say that the Vedas are their monopoly. They alone could study them. It is evident from this that we have no religious book. If the Vedas belong to Brahmins it is their duty to conform their daily life to it. If we have no liberty to study books on religion, we are without religion. This is clear enough. Oh God tell us which religion is descended from you so that we may follow it just as the Brahmins do their own.

Formerly we were buried alive in the foundations of buildings. We were not allowed to pass by the Talimkhana. If any man was found to do so, his head was cut off playfully. We were not allowed to read and write. If Bajirao II came to know about such a case, he would indignantly cry: "What! If Mahars and Mangs learn to read and write, are the Brahmins to hand over their writing work to them and to go round shaving widows with their bags hanging from shoulders?"

God has bestowed on us the rule of the British and our grievances are redressed. Nobody harasses us now. Nobody hangs us. Nobody buries us alive. Our progeny can live now. We can now wear clothes, can put on cloth around our body. Everybody is at liberty to live according to his means. No bars, no taboos, no restrictions. Even the bazaar at Gultekadi is open to us.<sup>5</sup>

The Muktabai's utterance is quite evocative. Can there be a better tribute to one's teacher than realizing the very spirit of resistance and equality which Savitribai was trying to inculcate in her students? The importance of this autobiographical essay cannot be under-estimated. This is one the earliest manifestos of feminist orientation produced in an Indian context. It could well

be argued as an early piece of Dalit literature too. The letter further brings out the historical tag of social disability imposed on the Dalits. What is even more interesting is the reversal of roles imagined by Muktabai in a caste-ridden society where the oppressor is offered the role of the oppressed and vice versa.

Thus, it is quite clear that Savitribai was the first modern woman teacher of India. She was a woman on a mission and numerous reports available through archives suggest quite emphatically her equal involvement in the upliftment of marginalized masses through different means of education. Savitribai and Jotirao always believed in institutionalizing their work and mission so that its propagation can be achieved without their direct involvement too. One of the institutions that the Phules launched was the establishment of Satyashodhak Samaj which literally meant the Society of Truth Seekers. Savitribai Phule was one of the pillars of this alternative society and the head of its women's wing. Her contribution here, too, was quite important.

### **From social to political: Savitribai the organizer and the Satyashodhak**

Savitribai and Jotirao Phule envisioned that a change in society could only be achieved with the help of a fundamental change in the structure of society. They were strongly in favor of an alternative option which was supposed to be in contrast to existing Brahminical organizations. Such an alternative was founded by the Phules and some of their colleagues in the year 1873 and named Satyashodhak Samaj (The Society of Truth Seekers). The new society was broadly based on humanity, castelessness, rationality, truth and gender and equality. The Samaj had equality of human beings as its core value and believed in giving equal opportunities to all by eradicating caste and superstition.

Savitribai was not only a partner of Jotirao in his activities but also inspired him with her support and ideas. She was no ordinary wife, saying yes to all his decisions. She had an independent mind and a strong will which helped Jotirao in everything he undertook. After his death, she put in double the effort and enthusiasm and carried on with his unfinished work. She strengthened the thought process and association of the Satyashodhak Samaj. She dedicated her life thereafter completely to the Satyashodhak movement spreading it in different parts of Maharashtra. She was the pioneer of the feminist movement, but she knew that Jotirao had started this movement. They were united by their common concerns and commitment to bring about change in society. Theirs was a relationship not just of equality but of a deep respect for each other.

### **Early days as Satyashodhak**

Savitribai was completely against the system of an agent or a middleman between man and God. This agent had become a guardian of religion by creating false, immoral scriptures and by writing religious books that promoted inequality, engaged Bahujans in idol-worship and visiting pilgrimages, etc. These agents, whichever religion they belong to, have not shown the true god to Bahujans; instead, they caged the people into superstitions and these innocent, ignorant masses kept worshipping stones thereby wandering into the so-called 84 yonis. To banish these agents and to introduce the true god to the common people, the Phules started Satyashodhak Samaj. To become a member of Satyashodhak Samaj, one had to take oath in front of Khandoba or Shivshankar. They had three basic principles:

1. Creator means God is one, is true and is present everywhere and all human beings and animals are his beloved children.

2. Every human being has an equal and complete right to worship God. Just as we do not need any agent to serve our parents, in the same way there is no need of any middleman or agent to worship God.
3. A human being does not become great by birth into any particular caste or community but becomes great by his work.

To propagate the aims and objectives of Satyashodhak Samaj Savitribai and Jotirao used different methods. Savitribai started scholarship for ten poor students every year. Savitribai and Jotirao created their own Satyashodhak rituals of marriage and marriage songs to avoid any kind of interface with Brahmins. The bride and the bridegroom sang these marriage songs. Unnecessary expenditure was discouraged and thus families were free of debt. Savitribai herself arranged first two Satyashodhak marriages that were simple, low budget and without dowry.

### **Khadi and women's help group**

Savitribai was a firm believer in simple living and high thinking. She wore clothes made from her own cloth that she spun. Apart from teaching, Savitribai formulated a scheme of spinning cloth for the housewives so that they could earn some money of their own by working at their leisure. She set up a women's help group to streamline the program. She organized a small gathering of women to make them aware of this help group on the occasion of Makar Sankranti. Savitribai herself wrote the invitation letter for this gathering that reflects her passion for equality:

The gathering will take place on 13/01/1852 in the presence of the president of this help group, Mrs. Jones. All women should bring their daughters and daughters-in-law along with them for the programme. It would be at five o'clock in the evening. The women belonging to any religion or caste would be seated on the one carpet without any kind of discrimination and sweets would be distributed to all equally.

*(Mrs Savitribai Jotirao Phule, Secretary, Women's Help Group<sup>6</sup>)*

### **Barber's strike**

In those days, the situation of upper-caste widows was heart-wrenching. All women, after the death of the husband, were required to shave their head whatever the age of the widow. The Brahmins strictly followed this cruel custom that was said to have started in the rule of the Peshwas. Widows would not show their face due to the humiliation of having a shaven head. They would be shaved every month by barbers in the dark corners of their houses. Savitribai discussed an idea with Jotirao to put an end to this barbaric custom. She called a meeting of barbers and spoke to them about how shaving widows' heads was a violence against them and caused great shame and suffering for the women. She convinced them to go on a strike against it. The strike was a great success and was very different from general strikes. It was not for increase in rates or better working conditions but for a social cause sparing humiliation and suffering that was imposed on helpless widows by a tyrannical Brahminical ideology.

This strike was historical and although it resulted in economic loss to barbers, they participated in it because of Savitribai's passionate belief in equality was convincing. This historical

strike was for gender equality, against injustice to women and against a custom that imposed permanent suffering on widows. The issue spread in Mumbai as well as in Pune. On April 14, 1890, a meeting of the barbers was organized on a campground, near Elphinstone Hall in Mumbai. Barbers came to attend the meeting not only from Pune and Mumbai but also from Junnar, Vai, Gangathadi and so on. They lay down their razors and decided to fast for women who were not of their caste or community. Savitribai showed that it is possible to cross over the boundaries of gender, caste and tradition in the cause of relieving a fellow human being of suffering and in striving towards the goal of equality for all.

### **Writings: Testing different genres and giving social messages**

*Kavyaphuley*, Savitribai's first literary creation, comprises of 41 poems that can be broadly divided into seven broader themes of nature, social issues, prayers, autobiographical, poetic, instructive and historical, etc. Out of the 41 poems, 11 are on social issues written to bring about social awakening among Shudra-Ati-Shudra people. For her, there was only one path of emancipation for the Shudra-Ati-Shudra people and that was education. In her poem *Shudranche Dukhane*, she spells out what could happen if Shudras and women get educated:

There is only one path of education to tell to shudras,  
As it makes us human and destroys the animosity.<sup>7</sup>

(Mali 1998)

Here she moves one step ahead of Jotirao and tells Shudras that if they wish to progress then education is the only means to do it, that education would kill their animal-like (feral) behavior and make them human beings. They will become happy and prosperous. But for that they need to acquire new knowledge thereby killing the caste system that had been the reason for their backwardness.

Through her poem *Shikanesathi Jage Vha* she says:

Brothers, British governance has come!  
Casteist Manu and Peshwa's restrictions on knowledge have been revoked.  
You also wake up and break these shackles of tradition and educate yourselves.

This poem shows how Savitribai was constantly trying to awaken the whole Bahujan community. Today, we acquire education very easily so we do not actually understand the value of it. But the Phules had to struggle hard to make education available to the common masses. Phule believed that education should and would remove the hierarchy, casteism, Brahminism and superstitions from the society. But today, do we bother to question what type of education we are getting? What are we gaining from this education? As the educational system remained in the hands of Brahmins, they gave education of casteism only. And hence, Jotirao Savitribai's revolutionary efforts to spread awareness through education has been lost.

Savitribai further says:

Every nerve of your body should aspire to take education,  
And to sweep away the stigma of untouchability.<sup>8</sup>

She created new consciousness among women and Shudra-Ati-Shudra people that they should wipe out the blot of untouchability that had been imposed on them for ages by acquiring

an education. For her, education was the only true wealth, and anybody who possesses it, is respected by the whole world. This is how she explains in one of her poems:

Knowledge is a wealth, greatest than any other;  
The one who possesses it, is respected by everyone.

Savitribai was rational and intelligent. There was no place in her life for superstitions; she attacked superstitions at any opportunity that came by her, saying they were created to fool the simple and innocent masses. She comes out forcefully against superstition and blind belief in her poem thus:

By applying saffron colour to the stone, putting oil on it,  
And placing that stone in a temple;  
If these stones give sons through blessings  
Then why do males and females get married?<sup>9</sup>

She believed that asking people to perform rituals as a solution for a problem was merely deceiving people by putting the fear of God in them. These “middlemen of God” as Savitribai calls them, take advantage of the god-fearing tendency of common masses. But she said superstitions could be countered by logic and rationality.

Furthermore, she criticizes the theory of karma. She writes in her poem, *Manu Mhane*:

The people who work the plough in the fields,  
They are stupid, according to Manu;  
Do not do farming, is his commandment  
To the Brahmins; his Manusmriti says  
Shudras are born due to their sins in the past life,  
And they repay for their sins in this birth.  
They (Brahmins) create hierarchy in the society,  
Which is cruel, mean and inhuman.<sup>10</sup>

(Adapted from Mali 1998)

This poem attacks the karma philosophy. Manu says that farmers are ignorant and their birth as a farmer is only because of the sins that they committed in their previous life. They should, therefore, accept their low status as they were themselves responsible for it. Savitribai believed that these thoughts of Manu were conspiracy by the Brahmins to protect and perpetuate their own superiority and the common people should be aware of these designs of the Brahmins.

In her view, the arrival of British in India marked the empowerment of Shudras and the end of Peshvai or rule of the Peshwas. Hence, she calls the British the English mother of her disempowered people. But she also uses the “English mother” concept to mean modern and true knowledge and thoughts that will lead to the emancipation and liberation of the enslaved people. She says in her poem:

English mother gives true knowledge,  
Gives life to the shudra, gives love;  
English mother feeds shudras,  
And cares for them;  
English mother destroys cruelty,  
Gives humanity to the shudras.<sup>11</sup>

Due to the lack of this English knowledge the Shudras were dependent. Their lives were filled with pain and misery. Savitribai expresses this grief in her poem *Shudranche Paravlamban* (Dependency of Shudras):

Shudras and Atishudras, filled with ignorance,  
God, religion, traditions, conventions, consumed by poverty,  
Shun happiness, accept grief as their destiny,  
Believe in remaining in the conditions of their birth  
As it was said by religious scriptures;  
They do not have the vision given by knowledge,  
Hence, they cannot see the pain of slavery,  
Shudras are not independent of mind,  
Hence believe ignorance is happiness.<sup>12</sup>

Savitribai's life was dedicated to the common masses. Awakening people to a new world of equality and non-discrimination was an integral part of her work. Everything that she wrote such as poems, lectures, essays, were dedicated to her people. She also researched on the reasons of suffering, poverty and social, economic exploitation of Bahujans and shared the knowledge with them. She knew that if she wanted to free Shudra-Ati-Shudras from poverty and exploitation then they had to be freed from ignorance and inspired to fight for their rights. At the same time, they needed to be guided to stay away from false ego, superstitions and all kind of addictions. She wanted farmers to be freed of debt; she wanted them to use new techniques of farming for their development. She identified the sensitive issues in the society and spoke on them. Her favorite topics for her speeches were: business strategies, cultivating knowledge, the benefits of being virtuous or following the righteous path, not getting addicted to liquor and other things and the desirability of not incurring debts. Savitribai's thoughts are given hereunder under these five of her favorite topics.

1. **Business strategies:** She attacked superstitions with the help of this topic. She did not believe in fate, good or bad fortune, and so on. She said that laziness was the real enemy of man and hard work was the man's best friend. She urged the people to break free of the clutches of destiny, sins, theory of karma and become rational and work for the good of the society. As examples, she would compare the scientific attitudes of Europeans and the superstitious beliefs of the Indians. Europeans had developed themselves by involving themselves in business. The British came to India for business and later on became the rulers of India. The turn in their fortunes was not due to destiny or luck; it was the result of their business strategies and intelligence. She said that those who believed in luck and destiny were lazy and that attitude would make them beggars; this was the reason India remained in slavery for years, she said. According to her, business is based on hard work and rationality and hence, whenever she urged people to do business, she meant that they should be rational and intelligent in their activities.<sup>13</sup>
2. **The gift of knowledge:** Another topic of her lectures was knowledge and education. She would say that giving education was the best gift anyone could give. She would discuss in detail what qualities and skills were necessary to make a man's life happy, and the most important among them was education. Education was the only gift that would increase the benefits in proportion to its use. Besides, the giver of education is also a contented person for giving such an invaluable gift. For Savitribai, those who gifted education were brave and courageous; and those who received or benefited from education turned out to be more competent and balanced in their judgment and in taking decisions. Even though the British had started schools in India, Savitribai said those schools were not sufficient. The schools

were few and should no more schools be started, then it would take another 150 years for all Indians to become educated.<sup>14</sup>

She had a good grasp of several issues and thought them out in a mature and rational manner. This also gave her the right perspective about the past, present and future. She was sensitive to all social issues and was ideologically mature. She could not tolerate the degradation and insults heaped on the Bahujans. She was totally committed to put the Bahujans, people who despite being human beings were living like animals, on the path of development and progress. Her entire thought processes revolved around the marginalized, downgraded and helpless people. As she once said: "Mahar-Mang, Shudra-Ati-Shudra, bara (twelve) balute, alute, shepherds, gardeners, peasants, etc. are found in every village. They are the inheritors of knowledge, art, skills and hard work. But government has not utilized their talents. Their skills have been neglected and insulted by all rulers till now."<sup>15</sup>

3. **Virtue:** Savitribai would start her talk on virtue saying, "Virtue or righteousness shows the path of happiness to all human beings as it dissolves all sorrows of life" thereby combining virtue and happiness of married life. Further, she said, virtue should guide every human being. Everybody should do whatever they could in doing good to others in whatever they undertake. Righteousness always led to success, she believed, and she often cited the example of Jotirao's best friend, Sadashivrao Govande who became very successful in his life, which she attributed to his deep sense of righteousness. She cited examples of good deeds from his day-to-day life which she said would turn an ordinary man into extraordinary. She spoke in simple language and style giving examples from daily life that helped to convey her message to the common masses.<sup>16</sup>
4. **Addictions:** Savitribai from childhood was a keen observer and would study the people who visited her father, Khandoji Nevase Patil. Her philosophical and social perspectives were to a large extent formed by her husband Jotirao. She studied meticulously the addictions in the lives of Shudra-Ati-Shudra and the social slavery brought about by these addictions. She realized that the marginalized people could not be developed unless they are liberated from the clutches of these addictions. As she explained in her talks, "Addictions corrupt human's brain and that marks the end of humanity. Any addiction does not increase the reputation of an individual; in fact, it does the opposite. Hence, all people with addictions should stop." Addictions make a person a slave and he loses control over himself and his life, loses his self-respect and is exposed as a weak person to the society.<sup>17</sup>
5. **Debts:** Savitribai wrote a poem on the pitfalls of falling into debt and she would start her talk by reciting the poem. It went like this:

One who gets indebted through loan,  
Loses all his happiness,  
He is irritated, despairing and miserable,  
He is overcome by helplessness,  
The loan turns him a worried man,  
Takes away all his wealth,  
Increases the complexities in his married life,  
These things happen to him that takes a loan.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, she illustrated briefly how a debt or a loan is responsible for the loss of happiness and complicates life and hence, one should not be in debt. Also, the person who is in debt, in his helplessness, loses his inherent business skills, courage and enthusiasm. He faces ruin on all fronts. Debts are calamitous and are destructive for the indebted person.

## **Conclusion: An impactful legacy and a powerful Dalit-Bahujan icon**

Savitribai Phule was the first standard-bearer for female education in India and perhaps the first woman writer who was published. She was a real Satyashodhak who believed in the equality of human beings. The ground-breaking work which she undertook in the fields of education, social justice, eradication of caste and establishment of an egalitarian society is beyond comparison. The time has come for claiming Savitribai as one of the prominent Bhaujan icons and to propagate her legacy.

### **Notes**

- 1 Suryavanshi, R., 2006. *Yugastree: Savitribai Phule*, Pune: Mavalai Prakashan, 29–33.
- 2 Ibid., 38.
- 3 Ibid., 42–3.
- 4 Dhige, S. B., 2010. *Savitribai Phule: Vichar Aani Kary*, Aurangabad: Chinmay Prakashan, 32–3.
- 5 Suryavanshi, R., 2006. *Yugastree*, 58–9.
- 6 Ibid., 64.
- 7 Mali, M. G., 1998. *Savitribai phule: samagra wangmay*, Mumbai: Maharashtra State Board of Literature and Culture, 6.
- 8 Suryavanshi, Y., 2006, 78.
- 9 Ibid., 80.
- 10 Mali, M. G., 1998. *Savitribai phule (kavyaphule)*, 19.
- 11 Ibid., 21.
- 12 Ibid., 25.
- 13 Ibid., 93–5.
- 14 Ibid., 96–7.
- 15 Ibid., 97–8.
- 16 Ibid., 99–100.
- 17 Ibid., 101–2.
- 18 Ibid., 103–4.

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# 5

## SHAHU MAHARAJ AND OBC EMPOWERMENT IN MAHARASHTRA

*Bharat Patankar*

### Introduction

Born in 1874, Rajarshi Shahu ascended to the throne of Kolhapur on April 2, 1894. He was about 22 years old at that time. Kolhapur was a second-ranking kingdom of the erstwhile Maratha kingdom and small in area. The main throne of the Maratha kingdom which ruled over most of the Indian subcontinent in a certain sense at the height of its glory, was at Satara. The Satara throne was dissolved because Pratapsingh Maharaj, in 1857, opposed British rule and did not accept its sovereignty. He was captured, taken to Britain and imprisoned there where he died. On the other hand, the secondary throne of Kolhapur accepted the sovereignty of the British colonial rulers and remained as one of the small kingdoms under British rule.

When Shahu ascended the throne, the situation in his kingdom was marked by political and social movements. While on the one hand the political movement was dominated by the Indian National Congress led by Brahman intellectuals, on the other, there was a non-Brahman movement that was an offshoot of the Satyashodhak movement founded by a revolutionary social leader, Mahatma Jotirao Phule. However, the Satyashodhak movement in those days had maintained its independence from the non-Brahman movement which was led by Maratha chauvinists. But some progressive Satyashodhaks were also part of that movement. Parallel to these were the Arya Samaj and Prarthana Samaj movements. Rajarshi Shahu grew up in this socio-political climate of radical thinking, protests and change. This scenario was going to shape his emergence as a practical radical social reformer who based his thinking, on one hand, on Satyashodhak ideology, and on the other, was influenced by the progressive ideology of a bourgeois democracy of Britain. When faced with the dilemma of which movement to support, he opted for the practical solution: He opted for a compromise by choosing the obviously less radical alternatives like Prarthana Samaj and Arya Samaj to carry out reforms in his small kingdom, and thus, sent out a message of reformation across India.

### Socio-economic situation

At the time of Shahu's ascension to the throne, Brahmins overwhelmingly dominated his administration and also the field of education. Tables 5.1 and 5.2 indicate the situation.

Table 5.1 Caste and Employment in Kolhapur

<i>Employment: Untouchables</i>	<i>General department</i>	<i>Brahmans</i>	<i>Non-Brahmans</i>
1884	60	11	—
1933	26	59	—
Employment: Private department			
1884	46	7	—
1922	43	109	1
Students in Kolhapur (all schools)			
1884	2,522	8,488	234
1922	2,722	211,027	2,162

Source: Omvedt 1976, p. 126.

This was the situation in Kolhapur. The general picture of the distribution of castes in Maharashtra is given in the following section.

### Castes in Maharashtra

Let us look at the castes prevalent in Kolhapur in those days. The large “intermediate” category included the major artisan and cultivating castes. Most prominent among the large “intermediate” category were the Maratha-Kunbis, making up over one-third of the total population in the Deccan and Konkan and nearly one-fourth of that in Vidarbha. They were what is generally described as a “dominant caste” cluster in India and included an amorphous but stratified group with the traditional occupations of cultivation and military service; the word *kunbi* means, simply, “peasant.” Although there were no definably separate subcastes among them, they were by no means a unified group. Under earlier Hindu and Muslim rule, only the aristocracy was described as “Maratha,” the rest being simply peasant Kunbis. By the time of British rule, a distinction between “Kunbi” and “Maratha” was still apparent and was recorded by all the gazetteers; however, it was noted that these lines were often crossed, a rich Kunbi being able to marry into an accepted Maratha family. This had also been true in pre-British times. Distinctions were also made among the “Marathas” proper. These were stratified, clearly in theory but very loosely in fact, into the five families, seven families and 96 families (*shahhanavkuli*) of the aristocracy. Below these were a category of semi-legitimate Marathas (described as *kadu*, *akarmashe* and *kharchi*), the offspring of concubine relationships, who were distinguished both from the pure Kunbis and pure Marathas. Again, however, it was possible for wealth, achievement and some generations of good marriage to abolish the stigma of illegitimacy, and there was often only an indistinct line between these and the pure Marathas. In the 20th century, the identity of these various ill-defined categories began to merge: In the Deccan, “Kunbis” practically vanished into the “Maratha” caste; however, in the Konkan and in Vidarbha the distinctions continued as “Kunbis” were considered to represent the earlier population and “Marathas” as the more recent arrivals with the troops of Shivaji and his successors. Thus, the Maratha-Kunbis were a highly stratified caste cluster centering among the peasant cultivators but reaching up to feudal aristocrats and rulers; however, they showed a greater degree of unification and a greater absorptive power than similar “peasant-warrior” caste clusters in other Indian regions (see Table 5.2).

Table 5.2 Percentage and Distribution of the Major Castes

	Deccan	Konkan	Vidarbha
“Advanced” castes	6	8.2	(not given)
Brahmans (total)	3.9	4.2	3.2
Chitpavans	0.6	1.8	(not given)
Deshasthas	2.3	0.5	(not given)
Karhadas	0.1	0	(not given)
Gaud Saraswats	0.1	0.9	(not given)
Bania or Vania	1.1	1.8	(not given)
Sonars	0.9	1.1	1
Kayasthas or CKP	0.1	0.4	0.1
Other advanced	0		(not given)
“Intermediate” castes	61.7	64.1	(not given)
Maratha-Kunbis	36.9	38.7	23.9
Malis	3.7	0.5	5.4
Dhangars	3.8	0.7	0
Kolis (cultivators)	2	2.5	0
Artisans*	5.7	4.3	10.7
Lingayats	1.5	0	0
Other Intermediates**	8.1	17.4	(not given)
“Other Backward” and “Primitive”	12.8	9.4	(not given)
Kolis (Mahadev)	1.4	0	0.8
Bhils	5	0	0.1
Gonds	0	0	3.9
Ramoshis	0.7	0	0
Vanjari or Banjars	1.7	0.1	2.3
Others	4	8.4	(not given)
Depressed	12	7.2	(not given)
Mahars	7.6	6.1	15.1***
Mangs	2	0	1.8
Chambhars	1.7	0.9	1.1
Other Depressed	0.7	0.2	(not given)

Note: The figures given are for six districts in Vidarbha, seven in the Deccan and three in the Konkan. The districts of Marathwada and the two easternmost districts of Vidarbha are excluded because they were largely not involved in the non-Brahman movement. The percentage given is to the total population (including Muslims).

\*Artisans includes Shimpis, Parits, Dhobis, Nhavis, Koshtis, Devangs, Salis, Sutars, Lohars and Telis.

\*\*“Other Intermediates” includes Bhandaris in the Konkan.

\*\*\* This figure appears to be inflated by the erroneous inclusion of ahars (weavers) with Mahars.

Source: Omvedt 1976, p. 68

Malis (gardeners) were traditionally vegetable and fruit growers, but otherwise were cultivators like the Maratha-Kunbis and with an equivalent status. Under British rule, they took most easily to commercial and irrigated farming. Also, constituting a large group were the Dhangars (shepherds) and the Kolis, traditionally a tribal group, but many of whom were simply cultivators indistinguishable from Maratha-Kunbis, while others were included among tribal castes.

The rest of the “intermediate” category were the traditional artisan castes: Shimpis (tailors), Parits or Dhobis (washermen), Nhavis (barbers), Koshtis, Devangs and Salis (weavers), Lohars (ironsmiths), Sutars (carpenters) and Telis (oilpressers) who together made up about 5 percent of the population each in the Deccan and Konkan and 10 percent in Vidarbha. Traditionally, these had provided the various services for village cultivation but by the period of colonial rule, many had taken up other professions, most often cultivation.

The “primitive” and “other backward” castes were a very mixed cluster, mainly comprising the hill tribes who made up a high percentage of the population in the districts of their concentration (Bhils in Dhulia, Gonds in parts of Vidarbha, and Mahadev Kolis in Ahmednagar, Nasik and Thana). They were, in many ways, groups in the process of becoming settled castes; thus, for example, of the diverse Koli groups in the Deccan nearly half were counted as “intermediate” cultivators, the rest as “primitive” or tribal. In many places during colonial rule, such tribal groups became the most oppressed sections of the population, losing their lands to moneylenders and high-caste landlords and providing a continual base for messianic revolts and later Communist uprising (e.g., Naxalbari).

Also included in the “backward” category were Ramoshis, who often served villages as watchmen but were counted as a “criminal tribe” by the British because of their proclivities to robbery.

Among the “Depressed Classes” or untouchables, the largest caste was the Mahars, a vigorous caste found in almost all Maharashtrian villages. They were among the most important of traditional village servants, assisting the headman and guarding the boundaries of the village (for which they were presumed to have a special traditional knowledge). They lived just outside the main village boundaries. In many ways, their claim to being the typical Maharashtrian caste was as good as that of the Marathas, and it was this caste that was to provide the most vigorous anti-untouchability movement in India in the 20th century.

Mangs, or Matangs were traditionally ropemakers and musicians, while Chambhars were shoemakers and, in many ways, simply the lowest of the traditional village artisan castes. Phule had never referred to untouchables as such but used instead the phrase, “Mahar-Mang.”

Jotirao Phule had long before conceptualized the division of castes which were hierarchically placed into two sections, (1) Brahman castes and (2) non-Brahman castes. Within the non-Brahman castes he talked in terms of “stri-shudra-ati-shudra,” indicating the specificity of the exploitation of various castes among non-Brahmans and women from all these castes. In other words, what he meant was that women from all castes, including Brahmins, are exploited by men from all these castes. At the same time, he was clear about the hierarchical order in exploitation between Shudras and Ati-shudras. He analyzed Brahmins as the only exploiting caste. Even though he was talking in terms of caste, his ideology as he said in one of his akhand poems, was “all men and women should become toiling people,” meaning that to toil and produce new things, shaping the new world of humans is a thing not to be looked down upon but a thing to be proud about. In his book *Whipcord of the Cultivators*, and his other works like *Sarvajanik Satyadharma*, he stood for ending the sorrows of the working people in general. The caste composition which is reflected in the data above could be looked upon from this angle.

It could be said that this data, if looked at from Phule’s angle, shows a tiny minority of society was constituted from the exploiters and the overwhelming majority came from exploited castes and classes. A struggle for ending exploitation was to be given by the majority against the minority. But the ideology of the exploited was dominated by the Brahmanical ideology and the majority was bound to the caste duties supported by that ideology. The hierarchical division amongst the exploited castes prevented them from coming together in a homogeneous mass against their common exploitation by the caste system and the newly emerging capitalist

system. The attempt to bring together all the exploited castes and classes had already started from Phule's standpoint from his own period followed by Satyashodhak Samaj in the rural areas and also in the working class in Mumbai. His follower, Narayan Meghaji Lokhande, had started work during his lifetime; he was a founder of the first association of workers in India. Lokhande was followed by people like S. K. Bole, etc. This background, supported by the western education that he was beneficiary of, made Rajarshi Shahu aware of the bourgeois democracy which existed even then in Britain, the USA and Europe. A struggle which raged between the Marathi rulers from Maharashtra like Chhatrapati Shivaji and Sambhaji versus Brahmins who refused to call them "kshatriya" was known in the Marathi-speaking areas and to Shahu Maharaj as a family member of the descendants of these two kings. Thus, even history was distorted by Brahmins. Mahatma Jotirao Phule had done pioneering work in bringing forward Shivaji as "*kulwadi kulbhushan*" chhatrapati of the peasant masses. He was the one who searched for the Samadhi (grave memorial) of Shivaji at Raigad and cleaned it of the overgrowth of weeds and trees and brought Shivaji forward as a person whose history can give inspiration to "stri-shudratishudra."

Rajarshi Shahu was reading literature related not only to the Arya Samaj and Prarthana Samaj but also Satyashodhak Samaj. He found similar-minded persons who were working for the Satyashodhak Samaj and appointed a person like Bhaskarrao Jadhav, who came from the Satyashodhak background, as one of his highest officials. Bhaskarrao remained involved with the Satyashodhak movement even while working for the princely state of Kolhapur.

From the beginning it was clear to Shahu which side he should take. He took the side of the reformers against Brahmanism and Brahmanic practices and borrowed several ideological tools from Prarthana Samaj, Arya Samaj and Jotirao Phule and his Satyashodhak movement. There were several times when he referred to himself as part of working class and farmers. He observed the working-class movement in Britain and studied the politics of the Labour Party and other working-class parties and organizations and advised workers in Mumbai that they should form their organizations like their British counterparts in the working class.

### Affirmative action for the first time in the world

One can see from Table 5.1 that when Rajarshi Shahu ascended the throne of Kolhapur, there were no untouchables employed in the General Department whereas the number of Brahmins employed was 60 and of "touchable" non-Brahmins, 11. Similarly, in the Private Department there were 46 Brahmins, 7 "touchable" non-Brahmins and zero untouchables. In education also the situation was equally pathetic if one considers percentages of educated people in relation to the percentage of the caste in the population. This was a pathetic situation which a person like Shahu could not ignore. After considering the disturbing situation for a long time, especially the likely reaction to his action, he issued an order of affirmative action of reservation for those castes that were prevented by edicts of the Brahmins in getting an education and employment that required education. Although some from these castes were getting educated in the period following the movement of Mahatma Jotirao Phule up to Shahu, the numbers of such persons were pathetically low.

Shahu's daring action of passing the order on July 26, 1902, from England where he was touring on an official visit was like a thunderbolt for the traditional Brahmins and those following Brahmanic ideology. The order declared that from that day on 50 percent of the seats in employment in Kolhapur state would be reserved for people coming from educationally, socially and economically backward castes. It said, "Wherever the percentage is below 50 percent it should be brought to 50 percent with immediate effect" (Latthe 1924, p. 220). The order excluded

Brahmans, Prabhus, Shenvis and Parsis from the “backward caste” list. All the exploited castes from Mahatma Phule’s Shudra-Atishudra category were included in this 50 percent. Nowhere in the world did the caste system exist in this form so this affirmative action was specific to the exploitation in the caste system of hierarchy. But there were parallel situations where there were hierarchies based on race, and affirmative action akin to this was called for to undo the injustice to the exploited and excluded people. Shahu’s order was first of its kind in the world and even today it should serve as an example that can be followed for improving affirmative action laws in India and elsewhere.

With the passing of the order and its implementation, the Brahmins in Kolhapur state began to strategize secretly on how to stop and even considered approaching the courts. They wanted to pressurize Shahu Maharaj into withdrawing the order and organized a conference against this order. The Chief Justice of Kolhapur State wrote to Rajarshi Shahu, who was in England, that Brahmins were conspiring against the order and urged him to return forthwith so that the Brahmins could be dealt with an iron hand.

Rajarshi Shahu was given a rousing welcome by his people on his return. The Marathas, Kunbis, artisan castes, Jains, Muslims and the untouchables rejoiced, raising slogans of high praise of Shahu Maharaj as they celebrated. However, the Brahmins were very angry but since they and other upper castes were in a very small minority, of no more than 3 percent of the population they could not do much. But their mouthpiece, the newspaper *Kesari*, which belonged to the Brahmanic ideological leader Bal Gangadhar Tilak, took up the issue. It opposed the reservation order saying, “This order is not only a blow to Brahmins but also a blow to the people who are well-wishing the princely state of Shahu.” It also said that “... we don’t know of any example in which the ruler attempted to educate Telis, Tambolis, Mussalmans, Lingayats, etc.” Another paper *Maratha*, also controlled by Tilak, said that Shahu had injected casteism into the administration of the kingdom, apparently not caring for quality but rather for caste. Tilak was known for his ridiculing of the masses. He had once addressed a Congress rally at Athani, near Kolhapur, and said,

What is going to happen if Kunbis and Shimpis (farmers and tailors) get educated? Are the Kunbis going to plough in the Assembly? Are the Shimpis going to sew clothes in the Assembly?” he asked. It is indeed shameful that a person with this kind of thinking called as “Leader of Telis and Tambolis (artisan castes).

(Keer 1979, p. 417)

Brahmins from all over Maharashtra protested against this order, saying that it did not augur well for the kingdom. They were enraged because their power over the abstract knowledge and therefore, over the bureaucracy for centuries together, was being challenged. After the celebrations when Shahu wanted to visit the temple of Ambabai, one of the main deities of non-Brahmins in Kolhapur, the Brahmins objected saying he had violated the Brahman rule of not crossing the ocean and hence, being impure he could not enter the temple. Some traditional Marathas influenced by Brahmanism also opposed Shahu’s entry into the temple and urged Shahu to follow the rules made by the Brahmins in this regard. Shahu brushed aside the objections and entered the temple as the overwhelming majority of his people supported him. One of the feudatories of Shahu from Vishalgad fort wrote him letter praising him for his actions and criticized the Brahmins.

The exploited castes felicitated him at a function for his order. He explained how the caste system and the resultant differences could be eliminated. He said, “Without the spread of education among the exploited castes the caste system cannot be annihilated. As long as the

educational gap is wide between the various castes, all efforts to abolish caste hierarchies will be futile."

The Brahmins not only avoided the felicitation, they also spread the propaganda that the death of Queen Anandibai, Shahu's mother, was a consequence of Shahu's "sin" of the reservation order. They refused to perform her last rites in accordance with the Vedic prescription as they maintained that Shahu was Kshatriya. They attributed the fire that broke out in the palace to Shahu's sins. They also said that Shahu's ancestors, Shivaji and Sambhaji had "died early because they expected Vedic ceremonies for their cremation." However, Shahu was not dissuaded. "Just as the cow did not die in spite of the crow's curse, similarly, I am not going to be affected by the Brahmins' curses. I am not afraid of these utterances of Brahmins," he said.

Shahu continued his work to enable all the exploited castes to get the education that was necessary to obtain employment. He started free hostels for students of different castes: He started the Jain Boarding and the Victoria Maratha Boarding in 1901, the Muslim hostel in 1906, the Veerashaiva Lingayat hostel in 1907, the Namdev Shimjpi and Sonar hostels in 1921, Miss Clarke Hostel for untouchables in 1908, the Jingar hostel in 1920 and so on (Latthe 1924). These efforts inspired Satyashodhak Bhaurao Patil to found hostels for all non-Brahman castes including untouchables as part of the anti-caste movement. These initial efforts set the stage for the spread of education among the masses and spurred the movement for education in the pre-independence period in Maharashtra.

Shahu replaced Brahman officials in his administration with non-Brahman educated people such as Bhaskarrao Jadhav, A. B. Latthe, Mahadev Dongre and others (Omvedt 1976, p. 128). These people took the lead in organizing a state-wide Satyadhadhak conference in 1911, and Satyashodhak Samaj was started in Kolhapur state. With the spread of Satyashodhak thought through the support of Shahu, several poorer Marathas and Kunbis replaced the traditional ceremonies such as marriages with the alternative ceremonies promoted by Satyashodhak followers. About 200-odd Satyashodhak marriages and other ceremonies were reported in 1912 and 256 marriages and 1,513 ceremonies were reported in 1913 (Omvedt 1976, p. 128).

The response of Shahu Maharaj to Montague's inquiry regarding giving Dominion status and more freedom to the Indian people gradually in accordance with the decision of the British parliament was consistent with his attitude towards the caste system and education. Shahu said that for sure giving independence to India would affect the princely states which they would in any case, deal with the situation. The princely states would be forced to give more rights to their subjects on par with the rights enjoyed by the people in the regions of direct British rule. But for helping the people to understand the meaning of their rights, one should start with compulsory universal primary education. If swaraj was to have any meaning, caste differences should be totally abolished and there should be inter-caste marriages. Otherwise, a handful of people would usurp the country. This was as early as 1917. He also said, on one of the occasions, that if the caste system continued to be practiced as it was being done, then the very meaning of "swaraj" would be distorted by a few people. He expanded on his idea of swaraj and the need to eliminate the caste system:

This does not mean that I am opposed to the swaraj movement. I am saying this again and again, that we have to have swaraj. But, at the same time, it is true that to alleviate the bad effects of the caste system we have to take help from the British government. At least 10 years before the establishment of final swaraj we should have caste constituencies for electing our representatives ... (only then) we will know our rights in relation with swaraj.

(Keer 1979)

### **Attitude towards working class**

Rajarshi Shahu was invited to a working-class conference organized by a working-class leader, S. K. Bole, on November 10, 1918, in Parel in Mumbai. While addressing the conference, he said,

Mumbai city is famous for its trade and industry. Up till now, it was believed that the success of the industries and trade is because of the capital of the rich and expertise of management. It was the same situation in the western countries. There are also capitalists and laborers, and capitalists ruled laborers in unlimited ways. But nowadays laborers have organized their unions. As you know, a few strands of hay can be broken, but when you weave many together into rope they cannot be broken. With this rope, even an elephant can be tied. In England, there is no hereditary caste that comes in the way of growing to any level both in employment and in social status. But the situation here is different. The representatives of the laborers are elected in the parliament and assembly. Because the interests of the workers are opposed to the capitalists, there was no system for protecting the interests of the laborers in England. It is obvious that the advanced class never will protect the interests of the backward class. That is why laborers in England have organized their unions.

(Keer 1979, p. 363)

Following this conference, S. K. Bole organized the Lok Sangh or Peoples' Union comprising the workers of Mumbai. Congratulating S. K. Bole, Shahu said,

I hope that like in England, there will be a day in this country when the oppressed people would organize themselves in such a way that no capitalist would dare to oppress them. The workers should organize themselves into a very strong organization. Our weapons to fight the capitalists should be unity, mutual love, trust, and consistent effort. In England, the Labour Party has come to power. In Russia and Germany also it is possible now to establish republics under the leadership of working class parties. Here in India also like in England, workers should go on strike for their demands. They should understand their needs. The capitalist class in India is mainly composed of Brahmins and trading castes. The word "labourer" is not a derogatory word. Even though I am a king of Kolhapur I take pride in calling myself a soldier and a labourer.

On January 1, 1919, Shahu passed an order instructing the Health Department to give equitable basic treatment to "untouchable" laborers in the hospitals. The order stated that the untouchables who were earlier not allowed to enter the hospital premises, should be taken into examination rooms for checkups. "They are not animals," the order said. If any employee had any objection to obeying the order, he should resign within six weeks from the promulgation of the order. The so-called "untouchables" were basically bonded laborers giving corvee labor or unpaid labor to the upper castes. Shahu abolished this system too and he personally went around making sure that his orders were implemented.

Shahu Maharaj's commitment to the exploited masses was unquestionable. Once, a man called Gangaram Kamble, an untouchable, was beaten up by Marathas because he took water from a common tank. Shahu summoned those Marathas and whipped them himself just as they had subjected Gangaram Kamble to the lashes. Later, Shahu helped Gangaram to establish a hotel. When people came to know that he was an untouchable they complained to Shahu saying they had eaten food and drank tea in a hotel run by an untouchable. Shahu went to Gangaram

Kamble's hotel and in front of those who had complained, took tea from Gangaram's hand and drank it. Shahu's conviction in equality and his opposition to caste-based exclusion was unequivocal and there is perhaps no such person of his standing and position who demonstrated similar courage of conviction. He was guiding, through his own examples and practice, all non-Brahmans and particularly Marathas, to adopt rational and progressive thinking and to work towards abolition of caste and unite the labor class to resist exploitation.

### **Radical social reformer in practice**

Rajarshi Shahu was not a theoretician of social reform or an ideologue of radical social movements. But considering the various orders he issued, the strict implementation of those orders that he ensured, the proactive measures he took to promote education among the masses in his princely state and even outside, he emerges as a practicing radical social reformer. His ideology and theory were crystal clear from his actions. While we have already discussed some of Shahu's decisions, there are others that he took that make him stand apart as a courageous, committed and determined ruler who used his power for the uplift of the suffering masses. For example, on July 27, 1918, Shahu passed an order that practicing untouchability in his state was illegal. He also "liberated" the so-called "criminal" communities of Mahar-Mang-Ramoshi-Dhed that had been thus branded by the British rulers and were forced to report daily to the police station.

Within 11 days of outlawing untouchability, Shahu issued two more orders on August 8 and 10, 1918. The first order declared that the untouchables be given priority in the appointment of patwaris or the village record-keepers that were the monopoly of the Brahmins traditionally. The other order was to appointments in the revenue, judiciary and police departments, where untouchables would be given priority. In short in all the departments of the kingdom, untouchables were to be given priority. He even ordered that should there be capable and educated people from among the untouchables, they could be appointed even as chief officers.

Within a month of these two epoch-making orders, on September 18, 1918, Shahu passed another order abolishing the Mahar watan and the slavery of Mahars that was attached to it in the form of corvee or unpaid labor. The lands of the Mahar watan were given to the untouchables as their own land without any responsibility of caste duties (Keer 1979, p. 350). None of the leaders of the freedom movement or the socialists expressed this kind of radical thought, let alone fighting for or implementing such policies.

On July 12, 1919, Shahu took yet another radical policy decision to protect the rights of women. The order granted women the right to take divorce and the state provided protection to women from the cruel behavior of their husbands and other relatives in the husband's house. It was ordered that the man who behaved with his wife in a cruel manner would be punished by imprisonment and would be liable to pay Rs200 fine (Keer 1979, p. 401).

Shahu also directed his attention towards the Muslim people to give them education and raise their consciousness. He organized a special conference to discuss the importance of education. He also had the Quran translated into Marathi and published.

On September 6, 1919, he declared a manifesto, and on October 8 of the same year it was published in the Karvir Gazette. By this manifesto he opened all public wells, public buildings, dharmashalas, buildings of the princely state, government hostels, panvathes (place to take drinking water on the bank of a river or stream), to untouchables. He closed down separate schools for untouchables in his princely state and ordered all schools should admit untouchable students. His actions inspired to Maharaj Holkar of Indore who was one of the descendants of the Maratha kingdom to break the caste rules relating to marriage. This led to inter-caste marriage of their children with Maratha families. Their example was followed by the rulers of Baroda and

Gwalior princely states. One of his nieces was married into the family of the ruler of Indore state, who belonged to the Dhangars or shepherd caste.

On January 17, 1920, Shahu Maharaj ordered a change in the Hindu law of descent that allowed the children from inter-caste marriages of various castes the right of descent. This law also applied to Devadasis' children. However, the visionary and progressive policies of Shahu Maharaj angered the Brahmins. At a conference held in Pune on February 8, 1920, in support of compulsory primary education for girls, the so-called "Lokmanya" Tilak spoke against it. He did the same thing in similar meetings in support of girls' education in Sangli and Prabhadevi in Mumbai. Because of this, Tilak reacted in his rally at Athani. He said in an angry manner, "Are the non-Brahmans going to go to the assembly and work with their plough? Are the Vanis going to hold their scales in the assembly?" The whole protest against Tilak was inspired by Shahu.

On March 7, 1920, in a conference of Arya Samaj at Bavanagar, Shahu said, "Child marriage, polygamy, drinking, ban on women's education, and varnashrama dharma are outdated things and they should be abolished." He said that whatever was possible for him he had done in his state and that it was up to the others to do it all over India.

On March 21, 1920, Shahu participated in a conference of untouchables at Mangaon in the jagir of Kagal from where he hailed. This conference was presided over by Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar. In his address Shahu said,

I respectfully want, however, to impress upon the audience the fact that mistakes in the choice of worth leaders are the most case of our wretched condition. Selfish people, with the object of becoming famous by sweet words, become leaders and thus derive the ignorant masses. We must appoint leaders from our own caste. Even birds and beasts do the same. A beast is never made a leader of birds, or a bird, of beasts. It is because of the leadership of a shepherd in the case of cows, bullocks and sheep that the latter are ultimately sent to the slaughter house.

(*Latthe 1924, p. 136*)

Here Latthe says,

The analogy may not be perfect. But it was quite true that many so-called leaders from other castes failed the people at critical moments whose cause they professed to espouse and some less scrupulous, though more stout-hearted "leaders" took up the Depressed Classes cause for their own purposes. At least in one case, the Depressed Classes found that the "Leader" misled them even against the wishes of every one of their own thinking men give a go-bye to their unanimous demand for communal representation in the reformed Councils.

(*Latthe 1924, p. 136*)

It should be mentioned that the date of the same conference is given as March 22, 1920, in Dhananjay Keer's book, and there is a difference in the content of the speech of Shahu Maharaj. Keer quotes him as saying that Ambedkar should be celebrated as a great thinker. In fact, Arya Samaj, Buddha Samaj and Christi Samaj would have taken him into their fold with pleasure. But he did not go because wanted to liberate you. You should be thankful to him for that. I am also thankful to him I request him to have food with me in Rajpatwadi. At the end of the speech he said, "I congratulate you for finding out your own leader. I am sure that he would not stop his work until you are liberated. Not only that, there will come a point where he is an all-India leader. My inner self tells me that" (Keer 1979, p. 420-1).

Shahu took a huge step forward by abolishing the watan rights on the land called Kulkarni and Joshi watans, by which these two sections of Brahmans who maintained the land records of the village, would browbeat the population, especially the farming community or even tamper the records to the farming community's disadvantage. (Keer 1979, p. 342). Shahu replaced these Brahmans with a village officer called "talathi" or "patwari" to maintain the land records. This enraged the Brahmans as they lost their domination over the non-Brahman castes in the village. In fact, Shahu could have but did not take away the lands given to the Brahmans as watan for keeping land records. He did not do it to avoid a double blow to the Brahmans. He even allowed the Brahmans to sell the land. So practically speaking, he gave concessions to these Brahmans who had for generations exploited and oppressed the farming community and other artisan castes. Shahu believed that liberation of the exploited masses clutches of the caste system was more important than punishing the Brahmans for their deeds.

### **Modern perspective on agro-industrial development**

Shahu Maharaj believed in the importance of industrialization, trade and commerce in developing his people. He often said that trade and commerce were the religion of the Western countries and the major reason for their progress. He spelled out his views on these subjects at the Maratha Educational Conference on December 27, 1917.

It is not enough that we should be agriculturalists or soldiers. It is necessary that we should engage ourselves in trade and commerce and in higher professions. In the 20th century the prosperity of a nation depends upon its trade and commerce. In fact, trade and commerce is the religion of the western nations ... Unless we engage in commercial enterprises, all our activities will come to nothing.

Although he himself used articles made by local artisans such as Jingars, he told the conference that without industrial development, neither the people nor the country would progress. Shahu followed up on his convictions and started an industrial school. Another strong belief of Shahu Maharaj was that of sharing and spreading knowledge. He believed that the pernicious practice of monopolizing knowledge, followed and propagated by Brahmans, was the main reason for the enslavement of the people and also for the loss of traditional arts. His advice to the artist castes was to share their knowledge so that their art would not be lost forever. Imparting knowledge was a sacred duty, he said. "The true preservation of knowledge is not in preserving it as a secret (but by sharing it) ... By committing this mistake, the Brahmans degraded themselves," he said. He thus believed that industrialization and openness of knowledge and education were some of the ways in which the caste system could be destroyed.

Shahu Maharaj took several initiatives to start industries, develop agriculture and other employment-generating activities with the long-term goal of equipping the people with knowledge and skills to break the shackles of caste and slavery. He was constantly on the lookout for new ideas and his visits abroad to Europe were always fruitful. He experimented with setting up an aviary and honey-making, setting up a unit at Rajputwadi. He also experimented with glass- and silk-producing industries. He introduced coffee plantations in the Western Ghats in Lonavla and Budargad. He experimented with the oil industry and developed Shahupuri on the borders of Kolhapur city as an industrial area. He started exports of jaggery, groundnuts, etc. He encouraged farmers to set up sugarcane plantations. He set up a foundry and encouraged entrepreneurs to start production of iron ore-based products (Latthe 1924, p. 248–52).

He recognized the importance of assured irrigation to stabilize the economy of poor farmers. In early 1907, he decided to undertake a large irrigation project by damming the Bhogavati river near Dajipur on the western side of Kolhapur. It was one of the most important projects of his life. He said publicly that his life's work would have been done with the completion of the project. He appointed specially an engineer from England to oversee the project's construction. He also built some minor irrigation tanks in his state. While the dam could not be completed during his lifetime, today it is seen as an example of the modern irrigation system in western Maharashtra. This was the Radhanagari dam (Latthe 1924, pp. 286–7).

When drought hit his kingdom, Shahu Maharaj dealt with it in a scientific manner, as a humane ruler. He ensured that the basic necessities were available to the people in the affected areas, provided fodder for their cattle and even threw open the forests for grazing during the drought period. His policy was to ensure that the drought should not destroy the farmers' economy and lives which meant that he provided all that was necessary for the farmers to take up cultivation once again after the drought ended. Shahu Maharaj's policies to fight drought were certainly much better than of the governments of Maharashtra and India in the 21st century.

Shahu believed in democracy, and he supported the freedom movement against British colonial rulers. He believed that fighting the caste system was part of the democratic struggle against the colonial oppressors and the caste oppressors. The struggle against the caste system was a struggle for "real" freedom of the majority of Indian people. He told the Maratha Education Conference on April 16, 1920, that it was wrong to accuse him of spreading caste hatred. "To take the side of the people oppressed by the caste system is not to increase caste hatred," he said. Further, he said, that the exploited caste people belonging to one caste, the exploited caste, meaning that the caste differences among the exploited castes were not to be considered. "If we don't bring forward the people from the backward castes, then those who are supporting the caste system would continue to oppress them," he said.

He took on the supporters of the caste system.

Some people say, let there be caste differences; only caste hatred should not be there. But I don't think these people are right ... the existence of the caste system itself is an existence of caste hatred. We should remove the reasons for the origin of the caste system to abolish caste differences. In Hindustan, this kind of slavery has been there for thousands of years. I have seen many foolish people who consider our brothers and sisters even lower than animals and cow dung. On top of this, they are not ashamed of calling themselves the leaders of all common people, he said probably referring to "Lokmanya" Tilak.

(Keer 1979, pp. 426–7)

For him, he said, his real "mahatma" was the Mughal emperor Akbar, and Shivaji Chhatrapati, who formed platoons of Mahars and Mangs in their armies, and thus made a strong statement against untouchability as undesirable and illogical.

Shahu implemented a democratic system of administration in his princely state. In 1919, he handed over the management of the Kolhapur municipality to elected representatives from Kolhapur. He ensured that all castes were represented by providing caste-wise representation. Besides, after abolishing the Kulkarni watan, he established modern elected gram panchayats in 1918. Uchgaon, Kalambe, Rukdi, Chikhli and Bavada gram panchayats were established. These gram panchayats were given rights in the sector of health, drinking water supply, education and also some rights related to criminal and revenue offenses.

## Vedokta affair and Tilak's Brahmanism versus Shahu's progressive ideology

After Chhatrapati Shivaji's coronation (which was the founding of the Maratha kingdom of his time), the question about "kshatriyaness" of the Bhosle family was raised again by Brahmins in 1835 in relation to Pratapsingh Maharaj Bhosle of Satara, which was the seat of Maratha kingdom in India. In 1885 many Brahmins from all over Marathi-speaking areas congregated in Satara in a vedashala. The Brahmins were represented by Raghovacharya Gajendragadkar and the "Kshatriya" side was represented by a pandit called Vitthal Sakharam alias Abba Parasnis. As the debate got underway, one Pratapsingh, apprehensive that the two sides might come to blows, stood with a sword in his hand. From among the erstwhile knights of the Maratha kingdom, the Patwardhans of Sangli staunchly supported the Brahmins. The Brahmins were defeated, and the Marathas' "Kshatriyaness" was conceded. The Bhosle, Ahirrao, Ghadge, Palkar, Kanvilkar, Jadhav, Shirke, Mohite, Gujars, Mane, Mahadik, etc. families were accepted as Kshatriyas and hence, were qualified for the right to Vedokta rituals. In 1837, Pratapsingh Bhosle was coronated with Vedokta rites.

But this issue again came up after 60 years in 1896 in the princely state of Baroda. The main reason was that the people of Baroda had become aware of the crookedness of the Brahmins and their policies of oppression by the application of the "inferior–superior" principle of caste due to the work of Mahatma Jotirao Phule. Mahatma Phule had good relations with Sayajirao Gaikwad, the ruler of Baroda who had already compromised with Puranokta rites. He had also undergone *prayaschitta* (penance) for crossing the ocean. The people of Baroda state, inspired by Mahatma Phule, were agitated due to this. In 1884 Mahatma Phule met and discussed the principles of Satyashodhak Samaj with Sayajirao Gaikwad. Phule was allowed to set up a school to train Marathas for performing rites for various ceremonies in the Satyashodhak, non-Brahman way.

Meanwhile, one Brahman, Shivadatta Joshi, who had come from Jodhpur enquired why the Vedokta rites were not being practiced as was being done by the royalty of Rajasthan. Sayajirao requested the sardesai to gather and bring information of the rites being followed in Udaipur and Jodhpur. After getting this information, the priest of the palace, Rajaram Shastri was ordered to do the rites in a Vedokta manner from October 15, 1896. When he refused, Sayajirao asked Gujarati priests Revashankar Shastri and others to do the rites in Vedokta manner. They did without caring about the opposition of other Baroda Brahmins. This revived the debate over these rites all over again.

The newspaper *Kesari*, controlled by Tilak and his camp, supported the Brahmins opposing the Vedokta rites. The Kolhapur Brahmins were already enraged over the progressive policies and other measures taken against caste oppression and inequality by Shahu Maharaj. They began to propagate against Shahu, saying that Shivaji Chhatrapati had asked Gagabhat to do his coronation in the Vedokta way but because he was actually not a Kshatriya, which he did. However, soon after, Gagabhat had a fall in the toilet and subsequently died. The Brahmins attributed his death to divine retribution for his "sin." A Professor Vijapurkar was leading this campaign. Shahu Maharaj took on Tilak strongly opposing his ideas on the issue and this is how the great conflict between Tilak and Shahu Maharaj started. This controversy dragged on for days and it exposed the reactionary and undemocratic character of Tilak, who was being called "Lokmanya" or universally respected and loved. A person like Tilak who was opposed to all non-Brahmins and believed in the innate superiority of Brahmins and justified caste system could not be called a leader of the common people. In fact, he was known as "leader of Telis and Tambolis." His concept of freedom was limited to dominion status for India or to increase the rights and opportunities of the upcoming educated middle class in India at that time which comprised

the privileged castes. He was casteist even compared to his contemporaries like Lala Lajpat Roy and it is well known that he avoided and ignored issues of equality for the non-Brahmans and women in an independent India. That is why Shahu's fear of exclusion of non-Brahmans in the governance of independent India should the country become free and that is the reason for his argument that social and economic freedom should precede freedom from colonial rule.

Tilak went to the extent of opposing the socially progressive principles of the Kolhapur state on the basis of regressive ideas of Vedokta and non-Vedokta rites. Apparently, the independent India he was envisioning would continue with Brahmanic domination, caste exploitation, women's slavery and the newly emergent class exploitation.

The Vedokta issue should not be looked at from juridical and region-specific angles as it was being debated for years in Maharashtra and all over India. Brahmins said that there are no Kshatriyas after the Nanda dynasty. Actually, they also said that Parashuram, as one of their ancestors, eliminated Kshatriyas through genocide 21 times. This again is a questionable claim: If Kshatriyas were eliminated through genocide once, how can there be any Kshatriya to be eliminated again and again for 20 times more? Phule asserted that such claims were nothing short of fraudulent. He found fault with Tilak for supporting the fraud while talking about modern democracy and independence of the nation state.

One of the highest officers of Shahu Maharaj and his biographer, A. B. Latthe tells us about how the Vedokta issue started in Kolhapur. Though to a superficial observer of the Maharaja's life, he appeared to possess many traits in common with free thinkers, he was orthodox and religious in many ways. From his earliest to his last days, he performed his daily Pooja with regularity. His faith in ancestor worship, perhaps the most natural form of religious belief, was deep and strong. Many of his nearest companions found it difficult to reconcile the two aspects of his life—his readiness to overthrow some of the most cherished superstitions of his age and his steadfast observance of religious forms in many matters, which rationalism would refuse to countenance. Of the second type was his habit of visiting the usual holy places about Kolhapur on stated days for the prescribed bath in the sacred waters of the river. In the Kartika (usually October) month of 1900, His Highness used to go to the Panchaganga early in the morning for the sacred bath. Shrimant Bapusaheb Maharaj, Mamsaheb (as Babasaheb was ordinarily called) Khanvilkar and some others accompanied him. A Brahman used to attend this party at the river to chant the sacred mantras and make the bath holy by his blessings. It was observed for some days that the priest would not bathe at that early and cold hour before reciting the hymns as was universally supposed to be necessary. This attracted attention and when a question was put to him, he said it was not necessary for him to bathe as the persons to be blessed were mere Shudras, who had a right to the lower Puranic blessings as distinguished from the Vedic mantras which alone deserved a preliminary bath. One of the party came to know that this imperious Brahman spent his nights in brothels. Among the Hindus, the belief is very strong that indulgences of this nature rendered impure the body of the person so indulging, so that others would avoid contact with him until he washed himself completely. That their priest should treat them as Shudras, that he should deem them fit for the contemptuous treatment which was thus given, and that too by the wretch of a Brahman who spent his nights in obscene revelries and would not care to bathe before blessing his own clients, was a thought which touched the young Maharaja and his friends to the quick and they reminded him of their being no Shudras but Kshatriyas of the purest blood. "No," said the priest, "I deny these spurious claims," and unless the all-powerful Brahman community decided otherwise, he would never treat them as anything but Shudras. As was his wont, His Highness controlled the fury of his friends as well as his own and meekly told him that even though they might be Shudras, it would not be proper for him to do the sacred work of the priest without a bath beforehand. The fellow still would

not listen. The Maharaja's arguments were not hot enough to make the Kartika morning or the waters of the Panchganga sufficiently warm for the bath of the Brahman. It was no business of the Sudra—the menial caste man—to preach the Dharma to the priest or to find fault with his conduct, and the worthy Brahman remained obdurate during the remainder of the month with which the baths also came to an end.

This whole behavior of Brahmans continued on various occasions of Shahu Maharaj's family conducting their religious functions. And Tilak supported these Brahmans. He was captivated by the thoughts of observing the caste system to the extent that in 1892 in a paper presented in an industrial conference, "The Hindu Caste from an Industrial Point of View," he said,

From among the people of Aryavansh, the protection of their hereditary jobs and helping people to do that is very important and caste is a material and social organization in helping them to do that. That is why workers should use their existing caste system to develop their ethical and material conditions.

This kind of viewpoint is completely against the liberation of the working class and instrumental to dividing it on caste lines. It is sad to remember that the working-class communist leaders like Dange considered Tilak as inspiring working-class consciousness. For many years even up to the 1980s, the picture of Tilak was there in the Communist Party office in the Dalvi building at Parel. This of course prevented the Communist Party from taking even a mildly radical position and program for eradicating, even disturbing the caste system. Even today this party does not consider this as a basic program of revolutionary change in Indian society.

It is surprising that Rajopadhye, who was leading Brahmans in the Vedokta affair, was an English-educated young person. Not only that, men like Brahman jagirdar of Ichalkaranji, Professor Vijapurkar, also imbued otherwise with Western culture and education, were supporting Brahman campaigns about the Vedokta and Puranokta difference and supporting the laughable ideas of ignorant Brahmans. So was Tilak in this respect. That is why this issue should be taken up as an issue which is still alive in Indian society when the erstwhile *sarvasanghachalak* of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh gave an elaborate interview about the usefulness of the caste system even in this period. The fight which was given by Rajarshi Shahu in his day is not yet completely won. Because Brahmans are holding their all-India conferences and Chitpavan Brahmans are holding world conferences on the basis of caste ideology and their superiority in the caste system. People working in Silicon Valley are leading in these endeavors. The followers of Mahatma Phule, Shahu Maharaj and Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar, and even Marx, should take this issue seriously and analyze the reasons for the re-emergence of the theories and practices for maintenance of the caste hierarchy and exploitation even in the 21st century. The relevance of Shahu Maharaj today is crucial because he not only put forward ideas but practically fought with this orthodoxy with great bravery.

Finally, this matter was concluded by the decision of the Bombay government on October 16, 1903, and following that the decision of the government of India on May 1905. Because of these decisions Brahmans were temporarily defeated in the legal field.

### Contradictions in Shahu and their effects

Shahu Maharaj was a radical democrat and social revolutionary in thought and practice on one hand, and on the other hand, because of his position as the ruler of a princely state, he also had to make many compromises. Though he supported Satyashodhak Samaj and people like Dinkarrao Javalkar, Bhaskarrao Jadhav, Sripatrao Shinde and Mukundrao Patil who were

ardent Satyashodhak followers, he did not become Satyashodhak himself. Instead, he accepted Arya Samaj, which was in its own way opposing the caste system and opposing many oppressive practices of Brahmanism. But the Arya Samaj was still a reformist organization, not a social revolutionary organization like the Satyashodhak Samaj.

Though his fight against Brahmins in the Vedokta affair was laudable, and he suffered severe stress and had to face threats to his life because of stand on this matter, his position on the Vedas should not be ignored. Satyashodhak ideology and particularly Jotirao Phule's theory, rejected the Vedas outrightly as frauds, and for support of his arguments Mahatma Phule took refuge in the philosophies of Lokayatas and Buddha as well as saints like Tukoba. Phule took many examples from the Puranas and Vedas and mocked them as non-scientific and laughable propositions even on the basis of simple logic. But on the contrary, Shahu did not reject the Vedas and Aryan-ness of so-called Kshatriyas. It would have been understandable if Shahu who had defeated Brahmins on the Vedokta affair, had left it at that. But Shahu went a step forward and established "Ksattrajagadguru" with its Shankaracharya and established schools to train non-Brahmins in Vedokta rituals. This could be considered as a sort of revolt within the caste hierarchical society based on varna ideology, but as far as scientific and revolutionary reformist thoughts are concerned this was a regressive step. He could be defended by saying that he did all this to maintain his hold in the princely state of Kolhapur and if he had not done it then the main instrument which he used to eradicate the caste system and bring about democratic reform would have been taken out of his hands. We do not know whether this was a tactical move by Shahu or whether it was an intriguing contradiction in his thought and practice.

The effects of the conservative aspect of his thoughts and practices would be felt for generations to come, and Maratha consciousness would be shaped for generations to come. The first thing which happened was that in western Maharashtra and the Konkan, the erstwhile farmer castes which called themselves "Kunbi" up to 1881 census, started calling themselves "Marathas." In western Maharashtra usage of the word "Kunbi" stopped entirely. But in the Konkan people calling themselves Marathas started considering themselves higher in caste hierarchy than Kunbis. Marathas from western Maharashtra started calling themselves "pure" Kshatriyas even when a majority of them were engaged in menial jobs in agriculture and in cities like Mumbai. Shahu's actions gave rise to a kind of Maratha chauvinism which looked down upon all other non-Brahman castes. This was not the case with Phule's Satyashodhak movement and even up to the time of Jedhe-Javalkar in the post-Shahu period, but gradually the situation changed.

Today, the people calling themselves Marathas demanding reservation for their caste. In fact, people who continued to call themselves Kunbi are already getting the benefits of affirmative action as "other backward castes." These people who are demanding affirmative action should consider the fact that their ancestors were part of the Kunbi caste. Even during Shivaji's period Saint Tukoba said, "Good that I became a Kunbi, otherwise I would have died with egotism," scorning the Brahmanic sections. But his descendants in Pune district today do not call themselves Kunbis.

Coincidentally, even as this chapter was being completed, a Maratha samaj is a caste which was originally included in the Kunbi, has been given reservation in education and employment by the Maharashtra government (July 2014). The affirmative action declared by Rajarshri Shahu for the first time is now consistent with his declaration in 1902.

This brings us to the need for rewriting the entire history of farming communities all over India and the emergence of the caste system from the post-Buddhist period onwards. One should take forward the work done by Mahatma Phule to expose Puranic "histories" and Vedic fraud. Even serious theoreticians in the field of caste studies who believe in the annihilation of caste treat the Vedas as history, and the Ramayana and Mahabharata as historical accounts. There

is no hard evidence in the form of documents or artefacts or archeological findings to support the claim that they are true stories rather than creations of imaginative minds with the clear-cut purpose of justifying and perpetuating caste superiority. The task cut out for the radical revolutionary theory today is to take forward the theoretical intuitions in the writings of Mahatma Phule such as *Gulamgiri* (“Slavery”) and *Shetkaryaca Asud* (“Whipcord of the Cultivators”) and formulate a radical social revolutionary theory for annihilation of caste, annihilation of patriarchy and of class exploitation.

Shahu's history and his practical work supported by his principled arguments to bring about radical reforms are going to be helpful for this endeavor. Though he was not a theoretician, his work and his articulations lend themselves to several theoretical intuitions. With the passage of time and socio-economic changes wrought by development and modernization, the caste system has changed its form. The ideology of Brahmanism also has changed its argument and modernized it. But the crux of Brahmanic ideology and the basic laws of the caste system as a graded inequality and hierarchical exploitation remain unchanged. One should not just be taken in by the outward changes in the appearance of the caste, and merely curse the Brahmanic people for their venomous practices; one needs to bring forward a modern theory for understanding contemporary caste system.

Shahu, with all his shortcomings, was a progressive person and a great national leader of social transformation. His standing and contribution to society far outstripped that of Tilak, who was not only socially regressive but had an understanding of democracy and freedom constricted by his defense of the caste system.

Shahu will always remain an inspiration as a person who not just merely mouth empty slogans against caste and inequality but implemented a series of revolutionary programs and policies in his kingdom to bring about social transformation that he was so passionate about. Despite opposition, criticism and open hostility, he remained steadfast in his radical opposition to Brahmanism and its many manifestations as an organized system of enslavement, injustice and exploitation. This 21st century radical revolutionary theory needs to pay a tribute to this great person.

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# 6

## DR AMBEDKAR AND ANNIHILATION OF CASTE

*K. Srinivasulu*

*Annihilation of Caste*, it goes without saying, is an important text in the Ambedkarite intellectual corpus and for the anti-caste movement in India. *Annihilation of Caste* invests as much in practice as in theory and both strive for an egalitarian social transformation.

*Annihilation of Caste* was originally meant to be delivered as the Presidential address at the conference organized by the Jat-Pat-Todak Mandal in Lahore in 1936. It was published in 1937 with Gandhi's criticism of it in *Harijan* and Ambedkar's reply appended to it. It is this edition, reprinted several times and in various languages, which has become the "Manifesto" for the caste annihilation project in India.

We are in 2021. *Annihilation of Caste* was composed 85 years ago and 12 years before independence. Then, the original context was British colonialism and the nationalist movement. We are into the 74th year of our post-independence existence. Caste continues to be a principal yardstick to measure the achievements and the substance of the independence we attained in 1947.

This presentation of the argument is made in five parts. The first section discusses the method of reading a text and problems associated with it; in the second section, we try to map the present context—the intellectual and ideological context of the present reading of Dr Ambedkar's *Annihilation of Caste*; in the third section, we discuss the context of the composition of the text and its structure; the fourth section examines Ambedkar's critique of different perspectival positions on caste and Varna; the last section attempts an overall assessment of the text and highlights its significance to the anti-caste project in contemporary India.

### Reading strategies

There are two ways of reading a text: i) textualist reading and ii) contextualist reading. The former attempts an analysis of a text in terms of its internal structure and arguments. There are problems with this strategy for the meaning of a text cannot be seen to be transparent and taken at its obviousness. If the writing of a text and its reading are distanced by historical time, then it becomes all the more problematic. The temporal and conceptual distance between the context of composition of a text and the context of its reading makes the interpretation of a text a complex exercise. The question is what are the strategies to be followed if the contextual universe, comprising of the concerns, questions, conceptual language, methodological protocols

and intellectual styles of the author and the reader are not shared ones but are different due to the differential temporal zones they inhabit and the authorial specificity?

Secondly, the purpose and meaning of a text cannot be taken to be obvious. The methodological distinction between the logic of enquiry and the logic of presentation should sensitize the reader to the possibility of unraveling the complexity of the text at various levels. The concept of the “logic of enquiry” refers to the methodological issues, research problematic, strategies of enquiry that an author employs. There is a likelihood of an author not being explicit about them. The silences, ambiguities and absences in a text could render its interpretation complex and challenging. The absence of an explicit statement of the logic of enquiry followed by the author could also render the presentation, its structure, nuances, layered meanings, etc., difficult if not mysterious. The reader may have to construct that part of the story by excavating, putting together scattered statements, reflecting on the hints, if any, in the text or the *oeuvre* of texts by the author. The concept of reading in this sense is a complex engagement of a reader with a chosen text.

Thirdly, any reading of a serious political or philosophical text is not an innocent one. If the problematic and thematic of the author are shaped by his social and intellectual context then the reader’s engagement involves the questions and concerns of his own and of his time. Thus, the relationship between the author and his social and intellectual context and the reader and his context, on the one hand, the problematic of the author and the research questions of the reader and his/her curiosity/interest in and engagement with the text involve a relationship that is multi-dimensional and across time and space. What is therefore involved in the act of reading is a methodological sensitivity and conscious effort.

Fourthly, any political text that is distanced by time is read neither merely for information nor for solutions. It is logical to assume that the reading is motivated either by the methodological richness or by the shared social and political concerns or both.

Dr Ambedkar’s *Annihilation of Caste* has acquired a canonical status in the anti-caste struggle due to its classical statement on caste annihilation and also due to the methodological and conceptual clarity with which it is made. Despite the change in the form of caste, its place and role in different domains and its changed internal and inter-relational dynamics, the value of the text has not diminished because caste continues to constitute the specificity of Indian society and the anti-caste project continues to have relevance for social transformation in India.

Against this background, it may not be impertinent to note that Arundhati Roy’s (2014) introduction, “The Doctor and the Saint” fails to show any awareness of the above methodological and conceptual protocols. An introduction to a text that is part of the long anti-caste historical tradition of India, has a much larger intellectual canvass, addresses a whole gamut of issues pertaining to the caste annihilation project and is supposed to be sensitive to the methodological and substantive issues raised in it and its resonances and echoes, its silences and absences, illuminate its conceptuality and its potentiality. Instead, the introduction reduces the text and its central problematic to a specific and limited controversy with Gandhi. In fact, given the wide political and intellectual canvass the above range of issues are addressed as part of, ascription of centrality to Gandhi, who in all fairness figures in the text only marginally, is not only unfair to Ambedkar’s text but also to Gandhi. The lack of attention to the present intellectual and political context of the caste annihilation project further impoverishes Roy’s introduction and thereby it instead of enlivening and illuminating the text only renders it distant, episodic and even flattens it.

## From annihilation to democratization

What strikes about the text quite remarkably is the fact of its attention to the past and “present” of caste and urgency of its annihilation for the social transformation and democratiza-

tion of India. Thus, there are two dimensions of caste: The objective reality of caste and the subjective urgency to transform and annihilate caste. The whole range of issues that had figured historically and the contemporary dynamics of caste and the forces that are/could be allies and adversaries in the project and strategy of caste annihilation constitute the centrality of the text.

In a broader frame, the anti-caste project in the post-independence era is an attempt at the resolution of the “contradiction” between equality in politics and inequality in social and economic life and the “principle of one man, and one vote, one value” in politics and denial of the “principle of one man, one value” in social and economic life putting “our political democracy in peril” that Dr B. R. Ambedkar eloquently spoke of in his last address to the Constituent Assembly.

We are revisiting *Annihilation of Caste* in a politico-ideological context marked by the above contradiction and an intellectual context marked by what can be called distinct contra-Ambedkarite tendencies. The anti-caste project today ideologically faces Brahminism in its sophisticated *avatar*—ritualism, *vaasthu* enjoying wider acceptance/respectability; politically, caste has been co-opted by the dominant political formations and state and its governmentality; in the intellectual domain the following contra-Ambedkarite tendencies can be identified:

- i) Attempts to intellectually assert that caste has been declining due to the process of modernization and development. Contrary to the Dalit perspective that caste is a dynamic power relation that structures the social relations and state action in India there are attempts that seek to find a closure to the caste question in and through development.
- ii) The proposition that caste no longer retains a hierarchical stratificatory character as it has flattened into difference.
- iii) Attempts to undermine and dilute the significance of caste by denying any systemic nature to it.

Despite the fact that empirical sociologists like Andre Beteille (2012), D. L. Sheth (1999) and M. N. Srinivas have rendered a reading of caste that goes contrary to the Ambedkarite perspective and the political thrust of anti-caste movement, quite paradoxically there is no attempt to engage with Ambedkar in their writings. This absence of engagement is puzzling to say the least in times when there is a conspicuous social and political prominence of Ambedkar's vision and imagination of India as a contrast to the dominant idea of India.

### **“Decline of caste” argument**

The eminent sociologist, Andre Beteille, in a recent article has argued that caste has been on the decline. He identified three major areas of social life in which caste is said to be declining and not advancing:

- i) Observance of the rules relating to purity and pollution are becoming weaker.
- ii) Regulation of marriage according to the rules of caste is becoming less stringent.
- iii) Relation between caste and occupation was becoming more flexible.

All these need to be examined for they represent a systematic urban bias. It is an incontestable fact that in large parts of rural India:

- i) Untouchability in various forms continues to exist (Shah 2006).

- ii) Marriages within the caste have become more stringent even in urban India. Matrimonial advertisements in the dailies like the *Eenadu* (a popular Telugu daily) and *The Hindu* clearly demonstrate this fact. In states like Haryana where marriages are not only between castes but also within a *gotra* not only are not tolerated but have regularly led to honor killings.
- iii) As for the caste–occupation relations there has been increasing disjunction in its traditional association which is largely because of the nature of development that post-independence India has witnessed. But it would be too far-fetched to suggest this, which is still an urban phenomenon, as the evidence of the decline of caste. For in the modern urban private and even state sectors the caste–profession relation is reproduced with certain variance. The evidence of the continual symmetry in it can be witnessed in the fact that the jobs which are considered menial and less skilled and are labor intensive and low paid are performed by lower castes and the people occupying higher positions invariably belong to Brahmin, Bhumihar, Bania, Kayasta and other dominant Shudra upper castes.

Due to excessive empiricism in Beteille's view, the question that is important and pertinent to the understanding of caste goes unasked: How does caste reproduce itself as a system of social relations and enjoy wider social acceptance and visibility? Because of this absence he does not pay attention to the political economy of development and the role of state and religion in reproducing caste as a relation of social dominance and power.

### **Argument of caste shift from “hierarchy” to “difference”**

The transformation of the caste system has been characterized by some sociologists as marking a shift in it from hierarchy to difference and plurality (Roy 2014). But the *angst* coming through the Dalit writings and even the media reportage on Dalits, point to a different reality (Satyanarayana and Tharu 2011, Viswanathan 2005). The challenges to the ritual hierarchy of purity and pollution by the Dalit and subaltern caste movements have seriously impacted on the character of hierarchy and the density of purity–pollution matrix. But to characterize this as signaling a shift from hierarchy to difference is a clear misreading of the changing nature of caste. As caste adapts itself to the post-colonial modernity, casteist purity–pollution logic in fact assumes multiple forms—crude and subtle; harsh and sophisticated. Its reflection in and in fact articulation in the form of merit/efficiency as evident in the anti-reservation agitation is an important one. If the continual prevalence of untouchability in blatant forms in large parts of rural India (Sheth 1999) constitutes one aspect of the reality then caste discrimination in subtle forms in the urban and modern milieu (for instance, in higher educational institutions) is another—both in fact are evidence of the persistence of caste as a significant marker of social and cultural life in 21st century India.

The chief reason for the above one-sided understanding is the lack of appreciation of the dialectic of hierarchy and difference that characterizes caste. The impact of the Western categories of understanding social transformation is evident here. In the West, pre-capitalist social hierarchy was supported and strengthened by a top-down model of authority and domination. With the anti-feudal struggles and development of capitalism, the traditional notions of hierarchy were replaced by the notions of equality and freedom. Contrarily, in the context of India, because of the localized, decentralized nature of caste structure hierarchies are in a sense built up and get reproduced at various levels. That is there is no centralized authority to reinforce the caste hierarchy. With the transition to feudalism, the different occupational groups being co-opted into the mainstream *Varna* social organization are assigned specific locations in the hierarchy. Those who resisted integration like the *Adivasis* remained outside the Hindu fold. In the process

each caste group thus co-opted has not only assimilated the value of hierarchy and in fact reproduced it with itself as the center. In other words, the occupational social differences are retained through caste by replicating multiple-centered caste hierarchies. This is not done by force alone but also through implicit consent and self-regulated exclusion.

The caste system experiences a major crisis with the onset of modernity, possibility of mobility and new principles of organizing society like equality, liberty and individual choice. As these processes gain currency and ignite the desire in the lower castes there emerges a challenge to the existing arrangements based on caste. The present Dalit movement in fact is an expression of this process.

In a broader frame, Dalit movement and other lower caste assertions are expressions and attempts at the resolution of the new “contradiction” between equality in politics and inequality in social and economic life and the “principle of one man, and one vote, one value” in politics and denial of the “principle of one man, one value” in social and economic life putting “our political democracy in peril” that Dr B. R. Ambedkar eloquently spoke about in the Constituent Assembly.

Central to the Dalit project is addressing and resolving the contradiction between the formal political equality and the substantive social and economic inequality. What is unique about Indian history is that even in the face of challenges these contradictions continued to exist without being decisively resolved. It is because of this, we find a mélange of social relations, segmented and active, co-existing in all their contradictory forms and spirit, without being resolved and posing explosive possibilities and creative potentialities. For this reason, the project of caste annihilation presents as a slow, protracted, torturous process.

### **“Caste is not a system” argument**

A recent challenge to the anti-caste project is related to the denial of systemic nature to caste. In this view, caste as discovered by the European (the term, “caste” is derived from the Portuguese) missionaries and colonizers is a European invention—for caste is not a system but there exist dispersed individual castes. Europeans have imposed a model on caste by projecting a system onto it (Balagangadhara 2002).

To order these dispersed castes into a single hierarchy and to safeguard the hierarchical order, it is imperative that there existed a central authority. Thus, the argument goes that without such an authority to impose an order on all social groups, such a hierarchical social system could not be brought into existence. Since such a central authority was absent in India, caste as a hierarchical system could not emerge let alone sustain. This argument seeks to strike at the very basis of the project of caste annihilation. The Ambedkarite perspective that caste is a system of relations of domination and subordination and the basis of the socio-economic inequality in India, and Brahminism is the philosophical ideological foundation that is sought to be refuted.

But what is sought to be ignored by the attempt to view caste as an invention of the European other is the over a century-long sociological research and insights into the village society and caste system and proliferating Dalit writing and politics that has only vindicated the Ambedkarite diagnosis of Indian society and the annihilation of caste as the precondition for the establishment of an egalitarian society in India.

Thus, the intellectual undermining of caste as a system of hierarchical social relations and thereby the significance of the caste annihilation project constitutes a major challenge that cannot simple be ignored. Curiously, the effort at the projection of caste as a non-hierarchical, non-systemic collection of dispersed castes is happening at a time when there are challenges to the structures of caste dominance in different state theaters. Correspondingly, serious attempts

could be seen made by the regional dominant caste coalitions in these theaters to safeguard their dominance by various means—the most conspicuous being new policy initiatives and forging of new social blocs through co-option, accommodation and adjustment. Thus, caste in its new avatar presents an enchanting engagement for it is characterized by spatial, political economic and contestatory specificities that defy simplistic generalization and can only be grappled with concrete analysis.

Our interest in the *Annihilation of Caste* is enlivened by these new interpretations of caste that call into question and attempt to show the caste annihilation project as a thing of the past. Thus, our interest in the text is not merely a historical one but is informed by the centrality of the question: Why and how does the caste reproduce itself? We need to answer this by examining the continual relevance of the characterization of caste, the principles and strategy of the caste annihilation project and categories of evaluation of our success and challenges in/to the project.

### Context and structure of the text

To appreciate the importance of the text it would be instructive to appreciate the context of its composition. The immediate context as stated earlier was provided by the invitation from the Conference of the Jat-Pat-Todak Mandal of Lahore. As the text notes, the immediate reference point was the disturbing ideological tendency in the nationalist Congress of the political reform gaining precedence over social reform and gradually the ascendancy of the political and relegation of the social into non-significance. Even when the Congress displayed some vision of social reform it was limited to family (abolition of child marriage, encouragement to widow remarriage, etc.) and never was caste annihilation in the vicinity of the Congress's social imagination.

Though the immediate context was the colonial Indian and nationalist movement, the text like all deeply political texts is marked by a longer historical view of caste and anti-caste. The reference to the Brahminical Peshwa rule in the text is a pointer to this historical view. The text pins down the crux of the issue by identifying Brahminism as the philosophical basis of caste and the *Shastras* as providing textual authority and justification to Brahminism.

With a larger historical canvass, the text seeks to analyze the reasons for the failure of the Hindu society to show promise with the West providing the point of comparison, and the very fact of the subjugation of India by foreign invaders is seen as the evidence of a lack of unity and strength of India to face challenges. In contrast to the dominant explanation for India's loss of freedom that lays emphasis on the strengths of the invaders, Dr Ambedkar seeks to look inward. His diagnosis of the caste system as the internal structural cause of disunity in India and its subjugation is based on a longer historical view and goes beyond, even against, the Congress view. Contrary to the Congress perspective which considered India as being endowed with some sort of national feeling or India being a nation from time immemorial Ambedkar draws our attention to the impossibility of such a sense of community and unity because of the caste system that divides and orders people into a hierarchy.

The striking similarity with our times is that caste continues to be an obstacle to the project of nation-building and social transformation in contemporary India. Therefore a sense of urgency is imparted to caste annihilation.

What is striking about *Annihilation of Caste* is its open structure. When we say a text is open, we basically mean two things. One that it is open to criticism therefore amenable to improvements and modifications. This openness is instructive given the fact that caste is a dynamic and contested reality. This constantly changing nature is one important feature of the caste system that has made it resilient and persistent.

Secondly, open texts are expandable in terms of the problematic and thematic. This is evident from Dr Ambedkar's subsequent work wherein he revisits the thematic of caste annihilation and enhances our understanding of the caste question. Precisely because of this openness revisiting the text would help us to face the above contra-Ambedkarite intellectual challenges and prepare us to further the project of caste annihilation. Ambedkar's treatment of the theme can be said to be dialogic. The dialogic mode of reasoning in the text adds to its openness and expandability. This is remarkable given the fact that it is not only a political text but also a text that offers a historical and philosophical critique of the caste system.

### **Critique of different positions on caste and Varna**

At the time this text was composed, though caste did not assume centrality in the dominant nationalist discourse, yet the uneasiness with the caste question and its evolving significance as India's historical and social specificity was perceptively acknowledged.

The dominant nationalist position on caste viewed it as an internal problem of Indian society that could be addressed and resolved once independence was attained. In the context of British rule, the primary and principal contradiction was seen to be with the British colonial rule. This was the ground on which justification for considering caste as of secondary priority was made. As pointed out earlier even this was informed by a very limited social reform perspective on caste.

Ambedkar's poser to this dominant nationalist position had been quite sharp and pointed: How can a society which has not socially evolved to be free and does not contain the conditions and even does not attempt to create them be comfortable with independence when the loss of which was due to the same conditions that ought to have been addressed but have not been?

Thus, Ambedkar is not only questioning the sequentiality of the political and social reform in the dominant nationalist discourse by bringing forth the necessity of social reform as a precondition for India's independence, but also highlighting the intrinsic inter-linkage between the two and drawing the attention to the urgency and simultaneity of the social and political. The tension between sequentiality and simultaneity in fact reoccurs in various forms in the text.

It is methodologically necessary to note that Ambedkar's critique of caste in this text is an internal critique. Ambedkar wrote this text as a Hindu and therefore the argument for social reform. Interestingly, this reform is so radical that it calls into question both the core of Hinduism that is caste, its ideological basis, Brahminism and its textual authority, the Shastras. It is a different question whether with caste, Brahminism and the Shastras rejected, a debunked and demolished Hinduism would remain the same.

So much has been written about the debate between Gandhi and Dr Ambedkar, that it is pertinent to briefly recollect the central point of contention between Gandhi and Dr Ambedkar. Gandhi's criticism of Dr Ambedkar is two-pronged:

1. Scriptures/holy books are the basis of any religion. *Shastras* are of Hinduism. Can one continue to claim to belong to the Hindu religion when one rejects the *Shastras*?
2. Gandhi, making a distinction between Varna and caste, argues that in contrast to caste the former has the sanction of *Shastras*. Varna in this view is defined not by birth but by *guna* and ability.

Dr Ambedkar's rejoinder is significant for its methodological nuances that are central to caste annihilation project:

1. That Shastras are the basis of Brahminism and Brahminism is the governing ideology of the caste system. If Gandhi is rejecting caste as the innovation of selfish interests, then its rejection requires the demolition of its basis i.e., Brahminism and Shastras.
2. Dr Ambedkar also hints at the fact that Varna is an abstraction or at the best a mummified thing of the past; in contrast, caste is a living reality. Assuming that Varna characterized as the classical division of labor based on *guna*, not on birth, the fact that it has been negated and superseded by *jati* (caste) based on birth cannot be ignored. The resurrection of Varna in the place of hereditary and hierarchical caste is a historical impossibility. Thus, the rejection of caste to justify Varna constitutes simple escapism for both are hierarchical and support ritual purity and pollution. Dr. Ambedkar points to the fragility of the distinction between Varna and caste and its irrelevance to understand contemporary society and definitely for transformative politics.
3. The solution does not lie in the resurrection of Varna as an answer to caste but the annihilation of caste and transcendence of both. The caste annihilation project by its logic rejects Varna, which is the framework within which caste and its proliferation have happened. Modern society in India needs a frame of division of labor that throws out the historical baggage of the Varna and the irrational caste system.
4. Dr Ambedkar's insistence on new language and new concepts has epistemic significance: "All reform consists in a change in the notions, sentiment and mental attitudes of the people towards men and things." Thus, a new society requires new language and concepts, and old concepts and categories become a fetter on the new.

In this debate, Gandhi's observation that Dr Ambedkar's position in the *Annihilation of Caste* was indicative of his already being out of the casteist Hindu fold needs to be reflected upon. For one of the crucial questions central to the caste annihilation project is: *Is it possible to annihilate caste, being part of Hinduism?*

The answer to this is partly available in Dr Ambedkar's text itself. The following propositions could be seen as the basis of such a view:

- i) Dr Ambedkar hints at it when he says, "this is my last speech as a Hindu."
- ii) He highlights the ethical superiority of Buddhism in contrast to Brahminism.
- iii) He argues for a religion based on Liberty, Equality and Fraternity.
- iv) Dr Ambedkar is against Hinduism for its lack of ethics and spiritualism.
- v) He recognizes the need of spirituality for human existence that is not available in the caste centric Hinduism.
- vi) Instead of pitting the East against the West, which was a standard refrain in the nationalist discourse and even in the post-colonial thought Dr Ambedkar advocates universal categories and values to guide individual and social life.

It is pertinent to note that there is an indication of lower caste shraminic subalternity as an opposition to Brahminism within Hinduism which retains its autonomy despite its contamination by Brahminism. This autonomous thinking and practice(s) could be the basis of an alternative spirituality in contrast to Brahminical irrationality.

### Caste as division of labor

One of the strong defenses of the caste system is based on the argument that caste is nothing more than division of labor. There should be nothing wrong and objectionable with caste if

it were to refer only to division of labor, as division of labor is intrinsic to any developed and complex society.

*Annihilation of Caste*, through a critique of this position presents an original formulation that caste is not merely division of labor but “*is also a division of laborers.*” Further elaboration brings out the hidden complexity of caste that defies the logic and purpose of division of labor as a historical category and as a theoretical postulate.

Division of labor *à la* classical political economists like Smith<sup>1</sup> is a natural growth of complex economic and social activity. It is based on abilities, aptitudes and technical skills. It is basically meant to avoid duplication of work and is defended and justified, for it contributes to the efficiency, productivity and also gives fillip to innovation.

In contrast, caste division of labor and caste occupations are not based on the aptitudes and abilities of individuals but on birth. Caste division of labor is not based on individual preferences but handed on hereditarily by the parents. With one’s birth into a caste one is predestined to perform a particular labor. Thus, free choice of the individual is unimaginable in caste-determined division of labor.

The concept of division of labor elaborated by the classical economists, despite the distinction between mental and manual labor, does not subscribe to a rigid gradation in it. In contrast, caste-based division of labor is hierarchical in the sense that the laborers are graded into “water-tight compartments” and their work is valued in purity and pollution terms.

There is no place for efficiency, the *raison d'être* of division of labor, in the caste defined as division of laborers. With aptitude, choice and efficiency ruled out caste has become a dead weight on the economic productivity in Indian society.

### **Arya Samajists and the Varna system**

Arya Samaj is an important attempt at reforming Hinduism that sought to bring forth the reconstruction of Hinduism on the basis of *Vedas* and sought to redefine Hindu society by resurrecting the Chaturvarnya—the membership into it defined not on the basis of birth but on *guna* (worth). This idealist construction is attempted through a strong critique of caste based on birth, of idol worship, encouraged by the corrupt and selfish priestly class that has become the bane of Hinduism and of Brahminism as its ideology.

Can such a reformist attempt be neutral to the history the Varna to jati evolution?

For Dr Ambedkar, the abstract theoretical sophistry that distinguishes Varna from jati and rejects the latter, for the former cannot hide and deny the logical and historical relationship between the two and the fact of the jati and fiction of the Varna in contemporary India.

Dr Ambedkar also subjects the view of Dr S. Radhakrishnan in his *Hindu view of life* that Hinduism is a way of life marked by its Catholicism, openness and resilience and “has been able to maintain its supremacy and even the proselytizing creeds backed by political power have not been able to coerce the large majority of Hindus to their views.” Dr Ambedkar remarked, “I fear that his statement may become the basis of a vicious argument that *the fact of survival is proof of fitness to survive*” (emphasis added).

### **Marxism and economic determinism**

The most significant and contemporaneously relevant issue is Dr Ambedkar’s engagement with Marxism, its dominant economic reductionist variant. It would not be an exaggeration to see a methodological critique of the received frame of Marxism in India and its failure to engage with the live reality of caste in Indian society. Arguing against the primacy and pre-eminence

assigned to the economic over other instances Dr Ambedkar argues that the social status of caste and sense of low and high have an important role in society: “That the social status of an individual by itself often becomes a source of power and authority is made clear by the sway which the Mahatmas have held over the common man. Why do millionaires in India obey penniless Sadhus and Fakirs?”

The dominant economic deterministic version of Marxism assumes that capitalism as it expands would create the conditions for the decline of caste. The assumption is that since caste is a pre-capitalist institution it would lose its relevance and thereby decline with the capitalist transition. For Ambedkar, Indian Marxism has failed to understand the significance of Brahminism and its contribution to the resilience of caste through the mechanism of co-option and modification.

Further drawing our attention to the importance of caste in social transformation, two aspects are highlighted. One is the place of caste in the worldview of the popular classes in terms their self-perception and perception of the other and how it affects the working people’s effort to “present a united front” as an integral part of the revolutionary process.

Two, he questions the inexact prioritization of the economic over the social or class over caste by asking by some freak of fortune a revolution does take place and the socialists come in power, will they not have to deal with the problems created by the particular social order prevalent in India?

He further emphasizes:

He will be compelled to take account of caste after the revolution if he does not take account of it before the revolution. This is only another way of saying that turn in any direction you like, caste is the monster that crosses your path.

Thus, as against the dominant views on caste, Dr Ambedkar’s question: How has caste, as a division of laborers, led to the economic inefficiency and absence of a sense of community and solidarity and, therefore, to social degradation and spiritual deprivation?

This draws our attention to the necessity of specifically addressing caste and creating conditions for its annihilation as a precondition for rejuvenation of Indian society and the creation of egalitarian social order.

*Annihilation of Caste* can provide an important basis of a critique of dominant form of Indian Marxism and definitely Marxist practice that is dissociated from the popular classes, their commonsense thinking and their aspirations alternatively seeped in electoral politics and preoccupied with sloganeering of secularism and socialism that has little to do with the actual everyday life and thought of people determined by caste discrimination and marginalization cutting across religious demarcations.

*Annihilation of Caste* defines politics in a larger expanded sense which in the present context could be seen as an invitation to the recognition of the importance of an expanded domain of non-electoral politics (*vis-à-vis* restricted electoral domain) and civil society sphere which are crucial to the autonomy and assertion of the anti-caste political agency.

From the critique of the above positions, it is possible to summarize Dr Ambedkar’s position on caste as follows:

- i) Caste is the historical specificity of Indian society.
- ii) Caste is hierarchical system with the rules of precedence clearly defined and adhered to.
- iii) It is not merely division of labor but also significantly division of laborers.
- iv) Brahminism is the ideological basis of caste; the Shastras provide its textual sanctity.
- v) Caste is a dynamic system and despite the changing nature of caste Brahminism remains its ideological framework that provides legitimacy to it.

- vi) The divisive graded nature of caste and its exclusions is the cause of the absence of any unity among the Hindus; comparison with the Muslims or Christians who display a sense of community despite the internal differences demonstrates this point.
- vii) The annihilation of caste and capitalism instead of leading to the decline of caste and its ideological basis has been co-opted and modified by Brahminism to strengthen the graded system in a new form.
- viii) The destruction of its ideological basis that is Brahminism becomes the precondition for social transformation in India and the creation of community based on public spirit and charity. You cannot create a nation without demolishing the caste system.

### **Annihilation of caste: Agenda, project, strategy**

The caste annihilation project is not only subversive and deconstructive but also involves reconstruction. It involves a process of dialectical intertwining of negative and positive and transcendence of caste by demolishing it and overcoming it. The Hegelian category of *aufhebung* could be instructively deployed to attempt a dialectical methodological reading of the text and context—the reading of caste in the text and the ontology of caste—its being and becoming.

The Hegelian conceptual corpus would illuminate Dr Ambedkar's text and its insights into the process of preservation, negation and survival and reproduction of the caste system in the colonial and post-colonial period. This is necessary to appreciate the power/strength of caste *vis-à-vis* the practice of anti-caste. An appraisal of the dynamics of caste is essential to renew the Ambedkarite caste annihilation project that involves both subversion/destruction and transcendence of caste against its conservation and perpetuation.

### **Brahminism among the subaltern castes**

How caste as a system of dominance functions is the central object of Dr Ambedkar's analysis. What sustains caste as a system is Brahminism. The significance of religion along with state in the persistence and power of caste is crucial to his analysis. This draws our attention to Dr Ambedkar's reference to Brahminism within the subaltern castes which not only makes the latter accept the ideological superiority of Brahminical rituals and practices but also is the cause of their active emulation and practice as a means of upward mobility in the caste hierarchy. This process of ritual imitation of the castes higher in the caste hierarchy by the lower castes as a means of seeking ritual upgradation and social mobility is noted by Dr Ambedkar in his discussion of the lower caste Sonars and Pathare Prabhus efforts at ritual imitation of Brahminical practices much before its popularization by the famous sociologist M. N. Srinivas through his concept of Sanskritization.

The analysis of the Peshwas' opposition to the imitation of Brahminical practices by the lower caste Sonars and Pathare Prabhus highlights the role of state and political power in the protection of caste dominance. It also suggests the respectability and acceptance for higher-caste rituals and practices among the lower castes. This insight of Dr Ambedkar into the presence of Brahminism in the lives of subaltern castes needs to be reflected and theorized as a mode of legitimacy for caste superiority supported by Brahminism.

### **The methodological significance of this discussion has two dimensions**

First is the recognition of the significance of the fact that the state has an important role in the reproduction of caste dominance and legitimacy. If the Peshwa power prevented the

Sanskritization process to safeguard Brahminical superiority, then the modern state could logically encourage it to dilute the caste contradictions and antagonism as an acceptable condition for furthering electoral democratic politics. The state could act either way depending on the context and to safeguard the system of caste-class dominance. If the publicity, concessions and facilities provided to the Brahminical Gods and temples is one aspect of the modern (regional) state's policy then the patronage to and popularization of the lower caste temples, *jatharas* (fairs), symbols, icons is another aspect of the same state. When M. N. Srinivas emphasized *Sanskritization* as a social process resorted to by the lower castes for their social status upgradation it goes to the credit of Dr Ambedkar to note the political dimension of this process by identifying it as part of the larger process of caste hegemony forged by the state and political regimes on the subaltern castes.<sup>2</sup>

This shows that the caste system is not sustained by dominance alone but there is consent on the part of the lower castes which renders caste its legitimacy. This is despite, or rather alongside, the resistance and opposition.

Second, the methodological issue for the anti-caste project is that because of the dialectic of dominance and legitimacy, coercion and consent in the caste system, Dr Ambedkar assigns primacy to anti-caste cultural and ideological struggles as a preparation to the political struggle. The focus of the cultural struggle is to "emancipate the mind and the soul" for social transformation and therefore has to be against Brahminism and the authority of Shastras. Since the state is involved in the reinforcement of caste dominance, the anti-caste struggle ultimately has to assume a political form with a focus on state and political power.

The anti-caste struggle, for Dr Ambedkar, has to draw its strength from the subaltern materiality. The commonsense experience of humiliation, discrimination and oppression is the material basis of the negation of caste. Thus, the resources of anti-caste need not be looked outside, as the subaltern caste commonsense experience is a major resource. Given the fact that the subaltern caste commonsense experience is composite and contradictory its potential critical elements need to be identified and strengthened and prepared as the basis of theory and practice of caste annihilation.

It is instructive to note that the significance of caste annihilation is not limited to the emancipation of the lower castes but is essential for the larger and higher objective of creating an egalitarian society and building India into a nation. "You cannot build anything on the foundations of caste. You cannot build up a nation, you cannot build up a morality. Anything that you will build on the foundations of caste will crack and will never be a whole."

The issues that form the concern and focus of Dr Ambedkar's text continue to be central to the caste annihilation and nation-building project in India. We are living in times when many of us are susceptible to lurking doubt—would it be possible to create a casteless society? The revisiting and rethinking of a classic like *Annihilation of Caste* would be a right attempt in the direction of dispelling this pessimism. In this context perhaps it would be apt to recollect Antonio Gramsci's words (1971):

"It is necessary to direct one's attention violently towards the present as it is, if one wishes to transform it. Pessimism of the intelligence, optimism of the will."

## Notes

1 This myth of the historical rootedness of nationalism from ancient times is best expressed by Jawaharlal Nehru, the most articulate representative of Congress nationalism, in his *Discovery of India* as follows:

“Though outwardly there was diversity and infinite variety among our people, everywhere there was that tremendous impress of oneness, which had held all of us together for ages past, whatever political fate or misfortune had fallen us” (p. 38).

His exuberance becomes evident when he says,

“The unity of India was no longer merely an intellectual conception for me; it was an emotional experience which overpowered me” (p.38).

The link with the past becomes emphatic when he states,

“and yet have been throughout these ages distinctively Indians, with the same national heritage and same set of moral and mental qualities” (p. 40) (emphases added).

Jawaharlal Nehru (2008), *Discovery of India*, Penguin, Delhi.

- 2 Following Romila Thapar the counterpoint of Brahminical can be called “Shraminical.” See her “Syndicated Moksha” in Seminar 313, September 1985.

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# NARAYANA GURU AND FORMATION OF POLITICAL SOCIETY IN KERALA

A contemporary critique

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## Introduction

The 19th century began in Kerala with an urge by the different castes and communities to distinguish themselves from each other. This was the century when the famous Malayali memorial was drafted and so also the Ezhava memorial. It was a century of radical changes in the political fortunes of the states of Travancore, Cochin and the district of Malabar, all of which were undergoing the same turmoil of castes and communities vying with each other for a better share in the jobs of their respective governments. In Travancore, it was marked by a Hindu upper-caste resistance to the British imposition of taxes and in Malabar, by the slow accumulation of discontent with the Zamindari system instituted by the British.

The making of a colonial modernity reflected itself in the rise in demand for education amongst the different castes and communities. This was also followed by a representation of newly acquired education in the form of literary adventures and a search for new subjectivities taking after the colonial styles of rational thinking. Religion was one of the domains to be radically changed by this. It was brought to a discursive level of thorough self-examination to rid itself of what was thought to be evil.

Narayana Guru's (1854–1928) effort to transform the religious practices of the Ezhava, a lower caste that constituted majority of the Hindu population in Travancore, was a radical initiative to this historic backdrop. It was a situation of gross abuse of religion in the name of the practice of untouchability that the Ezhava leaders following Narayana Guru confronted boldly in the early years of the activism of the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNP).

Over the years this recognition that the movement generated was lost to the term Other Backward Classes (OBCs) widely used to denote a class or even a votebank. This was in contrast to the Dalits who have consistently fought for a political society of their own and have sought to preserve it. As a nationalist euphemism for exclusion, the “othering” of the OBCs is already a process at work in the various discussions in the media on the concept of the “creamy layer.” The clubbing together of Muslims and Ezhava within the OBCs also seems to have justified much of the political neutralization of lower caste/community desired by the policy makers. The

recognition that Dalit politics has gained in perspective is a direct contrast to the loss of such recognition to the OBCs. At the dawn of this era of a new configuration of castes and politics, what relevance does Narayana Guru have? This chapter is an attempt to analyze this situation, to try and see how prominent discussions or studies of his thought have dealt with the question of caste and untouchability.

Theoretically, it will address a crisis in terminology to locate new social groups/formations in a democracy and their ways of empowerment. Wakankar (2010) denotes the new departures in subaltern articulations of history and politics as “suspension of iconoclasm” by which he means the new constitutional freedoms exercised by the Dalits for entering political society. The religion-centered eschatological discourse of the Dalit subject (Bhakti) is, according to him, also at the roots of the creation of political society. Chatterjee (2011) had earlier defined the political society as a formation out of the political mobilization amongst the subalterns where the liberal framework of a rights-based politics ceases to function. It is also a politics of the masses, a means by which impromptu movements are realized in solving problems related to such groups as pavement or slum dwellers who do not have direct access to the facilities of basic living or exercise the notions of citizenship for their inclusion in a modern way of life. Wakankar’s use of the term in reference to caste-in-politics from a Dalit, subaltern perspective is informed of the urgency of defining political society in its manifold aspects. But what will be a point of departure to arrive at a general discussion of caste is a debate which seeps through the cluster of OBCs which has embedded caste in a significantly new way in society.

The rise of the OBCs has been linked to a combination of caste-class politics as opposed to the caste or identity politics of the Dalits (Venkataraman 2014). The problem with this representation is the statism as much as the status-quoism in which the modern world of caste is situated. It pre-supposes the promise of liberation from the presumed state of marginalization for the Dalits as well as the OBCs without necessarily harming the caste hierarchy. This approach—capabilities approach—aimed at bringing down the disparities in society has not sufficiently problematized caste. This is witnessed especially in the lack of sensitivity to the way the state discriminates in the matter of giving entitlements to different social groups for public action (Rammohan 2010).

While the fact remains that the state of the art in social sciences cannot but bow to the criticism levelled at it by Dalit and Bahujan critiques of jeopardizing their transition from caste to the nation (Aloysius 1997), it continues to remain equivocal about the collapse of secular nationalism that informed most of their basic findings about caste (Wakankar 2010). It is the qualitative aspirations of transforming a caste into a community that the Ezhava, for example, encountered in the state of Travancore during the pressure suffered by it from upper-caste Hindu nationalism. That even the subaltern historians fail to grasp the subalternity sustained by groups in relation to higher castes and not colonialism per se, is a point that has been missed so far (Reghu 2010).

Chatterjee (1998) has also claimed that the experience of capitalism and the formation of community in India were not antithetical in contrast to the West. There is an assumption here of community as an entity which has survived the “evil” effects of capitalism such as competition. This homogenization of experience of community can be seen to take as its model the community of Brahmins, which is the only caste to survive the open “mud-slinging” of lower- and middle-caste groups in the name of development (Venkataraman 2014).

It can lead to a trap in theorizing the experience of community formation in the case of the Sree Narayana movement of the Ezhava because the enterprise and spread of education advocated by the movement were coupled with radical political action to gain access into temples blocked to them because of untouchability. Their refusal to disavow religion and

caste to become secular is not directly comparable to the phenomenon of Sanskritization or Brahminization cited in the case of the modernizing of lower castes (Srinivas 1995).

Anti-caste radicalism of the non-Brahmin movement carved a role for religion in politics, only with regard to the road taken to silence if not to annihilate caste in all discourses of religion. Every one of the temple installations made by Narayana Guru spoke of a lower-caste revolt against caste, limited by the strong pressure of circumstances in which he lived. Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism also came as his will representing the culmination of a life of containment and death within the hierarchical society to which an untouchable was destined under Hinduism. Religion can only be read in either case as a tool for interpreting the notion of community which is to come against a community of the oppressive present (Wakankar 2010).

This community cannot be explained within the paradigm of a resentment which Weber (1998) offered while writing about the Hindu untouchables either. Its inclusiveness, universalism and public, though localized platforms for action, not excluding the sphere of trade or capital from entering the processes of its creation were in response to the challenges thrown by modernity. All these attributes endorse an active role to be taken in the processes of change, and not a resentment of exclusion or marginalization as suggested by Weber (Wakankar 2010).

The problem, as pointed out earlier, is not that of explaining or asserting the presence of such a community consciousness amongst the Ezhava as a result of the Sree Narayana movement, but one of confronting the-caste-within-the-community with the new tag of the OBCs. Self-restricted to functioning within the definition of secularized castes, the term OBCs is also consistent with a caste hierarchy. This has led to a situation where new explorations into the Sree Narayana movement are being sought.

The departure point for this chapter is the politics of empowerment of Ezhava without restricting it to their own caste assemblies. This initially came in the form of alliances with the Christians and Muslims of Travancore during the famous Abstention movement which led to the collective boycott of the 1932 elections by the Joint Political Congress, an organization formed for this purpose in Travancore in their struggle for greater representation in the state assembly. This alliance was broken by the Temple Entry proclamation of Travancore in 1936 that sent the Ezhava back into the lap of the caste hierarchy. The communist movement which gained strength in the 1940s completed this task by weaning the Ezhava away from independent community-based initiatives in politics and joining them into their own ranks. The status quo has been maintained ever since then whereas the Christians and the Muslims partially succeeded in getting their political interests represented through different political parties. The Ezhavas were deprived of any such participation. In their struggle to overcome this they have only managed to alienate themselves even more from the system. Caste, especially untouchability has gradually escaped the discourse of the Sree Narayana movement and now it struggles to find a foothold in the cultural-political tenor of representing Hindus by forming alliances with upper castes against the Muslims and Christians.

### **Historicizing caste—from caste to class**

With the specific case of Kerala, where a historical investigation into the origin of untouchability was never an issue with the social reformers and enlightened sections of the people, one can see that the Marxists perpetrated the belief that all Malayalis were once unified and equal, only to be taken apart by the process of class formation (Aiyappan 1965). It was the research of Marxists like E. M. S. Namboodiripad and K. Damodaran into India's historic past and Kerala's antiquity that held sway for a long time. This upper-caste genealogy was never seriously challenged because the movement generated little serious interest in politics. The Ezhava were

untouchables no doubt, but they were also the single largest community in terms of population in the state. Hence, their mandate was critical for any party to survive in politics. The numerical strength was commensurate with the class consciousness implanted amongst the Ezhava by Marxist thinkers.

About the impact made by Narayana Guru on the history of Kerala, the Marxists argued that he prophesied the demise of feudalism in Kerala. His call to stop practicing the caste in order to destroy it was the clearest signal of the decline of feudalism. E.M.S. Nambutiripatu hastens to conclude that the SNDP has not succeeded in addressing the more serious and grave problems which cropped up in the disintegration of feudalism such as landlordism, landlessness and so on. Damodaran also made a similar assessment of the impact of Narayana Guru. He values the contribution of Guru in having launched a nationalist movement in Kerala. The liberation from feudalism took concrete shape in the form of the industrial exhibition held in Kollam under the auspices of the SNDP. The new generation of workers detached from the shackles of feudalism, like doctors, engineers, accountants, managers etc. found their own ideas of doing away with old customs and traditions resonate in Guru's ideas. But some of their demands which could not be met by Guru's ideas found resonance in Marxism. Damodaran thus proceeds to make a very ambitious claim that "the heroic struggles begun by Narayana Guru against feudalism are today not being led by the SNDP, but by the Marxists" (Balakrishnan 1954, p. 300).

The Marxists had amongst other things also placed Narayana Guru and Mahatma Gandhi on same pedestal. In the movement of classes in history, Narayana Guru is a representative of the lower caste (Avarna) bourgeoisie and Gandhi of a higher caste (Savarna) bourgeoisie (Balakrishnan 2012). Guru as a representative of the Avarna bourgeoisie is almost the opposite of Gandhi who inverted the results of the century-old struggle of the Avarna for releasing society from the clutches of Brahminism. But such comparisons can only be termed trivial at best.

The Marxists, because of their failure to assess the case of Narayana Guru as an Ezhava thinker, mixed his thoughts with the question of making a class out of the Ezhava, the bourgeoisie. This class feeling was strengthened by the Marxists in the context of the widely prevalent generalization amongst the Ezhava as OBCs, of employability in the government jobs due to reservations. As a new mode of empowerment, it has given a new twist to the thoughts of Narayana Guru. It is, in the modified context, understood by the Marxists as a discourse of modernity paving the way for the gradual secularization of the Ezhava. Elsewhere in the country, especially in Maharashtra, the backward classes were more or less constituted as a political category as early as 1920s when V. R. Shinde, a social reformer, founded an organization called the Bahujan Paksha in order to contest elections to the Bombay legislature. The term had been already used once in 1896 by a newspaper called *Dinbandhu* to denote the backward classes. Shinde gave it a non-Brahminical face thus trying to line up different castes and classes exposed to exploitation in the system.

In the case of Kerala, especially Travancore, such an event did not happen. On the contrary, politically the Ezhava found sanctuary in the Congress, if not the Communists. But the SNDP, though strident in its criticism of caste, could never raise a platform of non-Brahminism by which it could enter the legislatures of the state. Instead, it triggered community-oriented organizations like the Kerala Pulaya Maha Sabha (founded in 1938 but preceded by Sadhujana Paripala Sangham founded by Ayyankali in 1914) amongst the lower castes and the Nair Service Society (NSS) founded by Mannath Padmanabhan and 13 others of his community in 1914) and the Nambutiri Yogakshema Sabha (1908) amongst the upper castes. The SNDP addressed the task of assembling a generality—by bringing up the problems of the sufferings of the multitude under the canopy of caste system—in Hinduism.

So the teachings of Narayana Guru, despite having never encompassed anything historical, dwelling on the marginal interests in the realm of Advaita, a long-worn philosophy of Hindu revival in medieval India in the wake of a Buddhist challenge, or even his actions believed to accrue from his powers of Yoga despite being no more than ordinary, ascend to a position of strength in the wake of the historic situation arising out of the peculiar combination of social and political factors under the colonial regime. More than a person, as one of his commentators argue, Narayana Guru was a phenomenon (Balakrishnan 2012).

It is quite relevant here to point out the fact that Narayana Guru became the phenomenon he has today also because of the attention he gave to material aspects of life, and not merely spirituality. The Guru also challenged Gandhi and the national movement to fill this gap—over and above the abolition of untouchability—of the material comforts of life between the upper and the lower castes (Balakrishnan 2012). He made the point that caste was, in a way, forbidding the material growth of the lower castes and the mere removal of untouchability was not sufficient for addressing the reform of Hindus and Hinduism.

### **Advaita and caste: Antinomies of Hinduism**

As observed, Narayana Guru was also a Vedantin or a seeker of philosophical truth. This has often brought on him the charges that he was a traditionalist and did not fundamentally alter society. The reforms propagated by him are thus alleged to be cosmetic.

Narayana Guru's work, though centrally linked to Indian antiquity (because he wrote in Sanskrit) or to south Indian antiquity (he wrote in Tamil also), is today situated within a globalized world of ideas. He is compared to a lot of Indian thinkers, both ancient and contemporary, and also Western philosophers but they fall flat into a cesspool of globalism which makes it difficult to distinguish most of what is Western and what is Indian philosophy from each other and the rest. It merely rises occasionally in defense of the latter as the ultimate provider of wisdom.

This paradigm for linking Narayana Guru's ideas with the systems of philosophy and the knowledge developed in the West nonetheless opens up a platform for the meeting of the East and the West. But does it really live up to the technological requirements of representation to articulate a form of thinking that can take care of the social injustices perpetrated in the form of knowledge or right to knowledge, i.e., the caste system is arguable. As pointed out by Nataraja Guru,

For various historical reasons the critical revaluation of the subject of caste in the light of the full implications of contemplative, non-dual Self-knowledge was avoided in India. In our own times, this neglect has led to extreme forms of social inequality and discrimination, known today as caste, exclusive and segregatory, leading to the extremism of untouchability. It is Brahmin versus Pariah dialectics.

(quoted in Yati 1997, p. 219)

Despite this potential realization in the evaluation of the role thought or knowledge can play in determining the course of social action, there is only a general appeal to reason in deciding matters of society in Nataraja Guru, who was also a disciple of Narayana Guru. For him, the attainment of self-knowledge is the ultimate aim of all social organization and Narayana Guru's own crusade against caste has to be seen in this perspective. He says that Narayana Guru visualized a world of a singular humanity unified in a singular caste, thus abolishing social differences ordained by humans against the rules of nature. With full realization of these facts, Nataraja Guru

is still content to leave matters of social dispute to a science of reasoning for their resolution. How a right to knowledge becomes and informs the knowledge in its realization to the self is a ponderable area waiting to be opened in the work of Nataraja Guru.

One of the reasons why the SNDP or the movement begun by Narayana Guru failed to make any impact in the Malayali understanding of politics which has continued to be dominated by upper-caste notions of government may be this. So, in Yati (a disciple of Nataraja Guru) while discussing the course of ethical action which proceeds from the teaching of Narayana Guru, the subjectivity created is that of a condescending and exalted self, which is constructing modalities for mixing with the world outside. The complexity of caste society is simplified in a way that makes it comprehensible to a sociologically informed self, for example as role-playing (Yati 1997). This may not be the historic case to be precisely speaking of an Ezhava, or a lower-caste subject in opening the course of ethical action in their lives. Yet, there is a certain awareness or awakening to the empowerment created by Narayana Guru in the form of an urge to gain knowledge. It is also to Yati's credit that he distinguishes Sankara's Brahmin from Narayana Guru's Arivu or knowledge. Yet they both serve like organizing principles for philosophy, just like "matter" serves a foundation for all modern physics and "life" for modern biology (Yati 1997).

### **Castes and species: Naturalization of humanity**

In an integral approach to the philosophy of Narayana Guru which tries to place his Advaita in the context of his views on caste, K. S. Radhakrishnan almost clinches the issues surrounding the ambiguity of this discourse. Radhakrishnan citing from three basic works of Narayana Guru referring to his views on caste—*advaitadipika*, *jatinirnayam*, *jatilakshanam*—shows how indispensable caste is to an understanding of humanity as a united species. But here caste means a form of perception which is unified at the bottom and in the nature of things, which is so fundamental as to require no explanation. It is that form of thought which is derived from a differentiation of the unity which is to be questioned when one opposes caste. This unity, which is the unity in Advaita, of Arivu or knowledge of humanity is essentially pitted against caste because it is pitted against any differentiation that goes against nature. In short, Narayana Guru while arguing for an end to all thinking or understanding based on difference of caste, agreed with its continuation in other forms.

Experience was a form in which caste was significantly known to be constructed, says Radhakrishnan. Narayana Guru's Advaita being based on experience made it explicit that a person's physical appearance, native place, occupation was significant only to the sensory world of one's own, i.e., of experience. It was naturally given to all in modes of perception—of experiencing oneself and others. This dissemination of caste in all species was his most important argument against its use by the few, in the form of asking for it, or talking and thinking aloud about it. In other words, caste differences and not caste as such was the prime target of his criticism (Radhakrishnan 2013).

Here it may also be argued that Narayana Guru in speaking against the use of caste differences in thought or philosophy, was also pointing at a notion of subjectivity, which was beseeching a question with respect to cognition and knowledge as to which caste is unimportant, rather than which is important. The notion of a universal which connects all the nodes of existence does not discriminate the particular (caste) in nature and hence, for the Advaitin in his search for truth, it is against nature to do so. This reduction of subjectivity to one based on caste differences was as culpable as a reduction to one based on difference of religion for the spread of social practice like untouchability.

The notion of untouchability, hence, gets absorbed into the distances created between individuals of two different religions, besides the distance between individuals of two different castes. So, religion and caste as matters of existence, derive their proof from nature and their effects are extraneous to principles of knowledge. The subject therefore can use such matter for knowing it/oneself only with the method of linking the elements of the universal and the particulars which is present in all living forms. With respect to human beings, it may be argued that Narayana Guru felt the need to emphasize or add that “one caste, one religion, one god for man.” Radhakrishnan addresses this as a state of Samanvaya, social process of reconciliation rather than one of calamity or conflict as generated in the wake of “othering.”

The resistance to subject formation in caste is not merely the challenge in the domain of social reform, but also in the area of reform of technological hazards to environment. Thus, the reduction to castes or religions of the human species alienated them from nature and hence the need to decentralize the anthropocentrism in environmentalism of the modern man. Here Radhakrishnan (2013) argues that Narayana Guru represents the poignancy of environmental thinking by making untouchability a target of his attack. The primordial oneness of knowing *karu* (in Malayalam, it indicates a mold used in the context of metallurgy whereby artisans produce artefacts in desired shapes and sizes using the karu. Here, it means the primordial unity behind the human soul which has shaped or molded it in such a manner as to receive the knowledge of the universe, and of its knowledge *arivu*, is hampered by the centralization in man of all the ends of nature. At one level, it may be argued that for Radhakrishnan, Narayana Guru represents a Rawlsian decentralized distribution of all primary goods—money, fame, respect, rights, etc. This is a formulation of social justice which is indispensable to environmental thinking, according to Radhakrishnan (2013).

Assuming himself to be making a lot of radical departures from the traditional interpretations of the thoughts of Narayana Guru, Radhakrishnan arrives at a commonplace error of making a mix of the thoughts of historically divergent streams such as Gandhism and the Advaita of Narayana Guru. This is made with angst to prove the concurrence of Narayana Guru’s thoughts with the Gandhian critique of Western civilization and Eurocentrism. Other than a metaphysical sympathy to common themes it is difficult to establish this claim through logical connections. Hence, one finds that despite Radhakrishnan’s best efforts at liberating Guru from the reduction of casteism, the projection of him into a national canvas of idealism, lands him in a land where he does not belong. Or even if he is made to belong, then is forced to do so with utmost unease and a sense of irony. But this company does not reduce Gandhi’s stature in any way. Radhakrishnan says that Gandhi produced several followers, all of whom were different from one another. Gandhi had entertained an Advaitic sense of freedom according to him. He then writes that Narayana Guru’s thoughts were also similar and entertained plurality. But he does not make an affirmative statement regarding its followers. The Gandhian enigma or charisma stands towering next to the lonely contemplation of Guru for lack of disciples. The strength of a contemplation of social polymorphism rather than pluralism cannot be undermined in the thoughts of Narayana Guru. This is just to point out that while maintaining his idealism on undifferentiated thought, he kept himself rooted within a social differentiation linked to the knowledge of the self.

In fact, this point can be better understood from the way it is presented by C.V. Kunhuraman a Buddhist disciple of Narayana Guru. In a long conversation with Guru on the meaning of “one religion” from his quotation “one caste, one religion” he explores what is the degree and nature of tolerance in the thoughts of Guru. He pushes Guru to the edge demanding the precise meaning of this phrase, especially whether he is willing to accept Buddhism with its atheistic beliefs as a religion. Eventually, the conclusion that the two arrive at is the plurality of Hinduism

itself, which while not remaining a religion has entertained the growth of different beliefs, all of which are worthy of the name religion—including Buddhism. It is important to note here that Guru's concept of Hinduism is in contrast to religions which originated outside India like Islam and Christianity. At an even more fundamental level what is more striking about religion is that even when collected under the shade of different religions, there are possibly as many different religions as there are people in this world. So, Guru aspires for an ideal state of worship to emerge only when every single believer's religion is accounted for, and hence the phrase "one caste ..." (Balakrishnan 2012).

### **The limits of reform**

Though Narayana Guru's idea of caste or religion cannot be reduced to a biological requirement and is extendable to the freedom of every single individual, the die in which such a vision was cast was of intense engagement with his disciples. Although Narayana Guru followed a strict regimen of vegetarianism and celibacy, he did not oppose the use of meat or stop his disciples from getting married. His response to the marriage of Kumaranasan has been a subject of some controversy and much has been written on it. That despite his marriage, he continued his friendship with Kumaranasan has also been pointed out by some. Similarly, he took keen interest in paying the bills for Sahodaran Aiyappan who got his non-vegetarian meals from a hotel instead of the Asram when staying with Guru. T. K. Madhavan, who ate fish, was also given similar hospitality. Swami Satyavratan (Aiyappapilla) was a Nair disciple of Guru about whom he was proud to remark that he beat even Buddha in inheriting or not having any caste. He even sent Satyavratan as his emissary to Ceylon where he worked for the SNDP for three years. Although an ardent lover of Sanskrit classics, Guru encouraged C. Kesavan to study English literature. He also played a major role in sending Kumaranasan to Calcutta to learn Sanskrit and Nataraja Guru to Paris to learn philosophy. Sahodaran Aiyappan reflects on the sentiments of his close disciples in these words,

We failed to understand his ideas in their fullness or reach a level akin to his ideas. It will be a gross misunderstanding of his ideas, of himself, of the very depth of his mind if those ideas were to be the ideas of us—graduates—propagated in his name.

(Balakrishnan 2012, p. 252)

The liberty expressed in life, of freedom of thought that has made Guru what he is today, was not a gift for the asking when the conditions in which such liberty was fought for and won are considered. The years (1856–1928) in which Guru lived, wrote and organized the SNDP movement were the most critical in the history of the state. A region divided into parts under colonial rule and native kingdoms submitting to colonial rule, was trying to break free from it. The lower castes especially were left with certain historically ambiguous choices at this moment. The missionary education which was empowering them on the one hand was pitting them against the nationalist caste-Hindus on the other. But it was the nationalist struggle which was challenging the colonists that were forcing them to submit to egalitarianism of some kind or the other. This is especially true of the fight of Dewan Veluthampi in early 19th century (Balakrishnan 2012).

The relative progress made by the lower castes in Malabar because of direct colonial rule, was gradually seeping into Travancore-Cochin. This was happening in the form of intervention by the native ruler to ensure in stages that the lower castes were relieved from bondage, allowed to cover their bodies (though not allowed to imitate upper castes) and in securing the protection of the rule of law (the implementation of the British Criminal Procedure Code in 1861). In 1866 with

the declaration of landlord-tenancy relations, at least marginally the tenants were perceived to have some rights over their land, if not life (Balakrishnan 2012). In this scenario, to speak against caste or organize people on the basis of caste was still unthinkable even amongst the exceptional and educated few from a lower caste such as the Ezhava. The Ezhava did not have the right to worship or even enter the temples of the higher castes' gods. They had to be contented with their own deities and in their temples followed a sacrificial form of worship. Their deities were meat-eaters and abundant consumers of alcohol. It is of great significance that Narayana Guru started his campaign against caste in 1888 with his installation of the Siva idol at Aruvippuram to the backdrop of this history. With the establishment of the SNDP in 1902 the campaign got a radically new face. Although started as an organization of the Ezhavas, Guru was steadfast about its openness. T. K. Madhavan wrote in 1925 that "the fact that we have SNDP has given us the opportunity to build a position of strength for ourselves in the community" (Velayudhan and Panikkassery 1997, p. 38). In contrast, Guru's message to an SNDP conference in 1927 was:

Organization is no doubt necessary for the strength of any community. That was the principle on which the Yogam was founded. But the name Ezhava is not meant to designate a caste or religion. Therefore, this organization can accept members without considering differences of caste or religion.

(Velayudhan and Panikkassery 1997, p. 38)

Getting access to the public road circling the Vaikom temple in 1924 was one of the popular campaigns for social justice in India. This garnered the support of the Congress (Gandhi also visited Vaikom during the Satyagraha) thanks to the persistent campaign of T. K. Madhavan against the practice of untouchability in different sessions of the Congress. Madhavan, being an Ezhava, did not get full support for his program for various reasons. Strangely one reason for this was the prejudice within the Congress of non-Hindus participating in the Satyagraha. This is made clear from a remark made by Sardar K. M. Panikker, a nationalist and Congress supporter of that period who says that despite being one of the close sympathizers of the Satyagraha and a close friend of Madhavan, he issued a public statement against it when he got news of George Joseph, also a friend of his, leading the movement. Not just that, he also got Gandhi to support his point of view (Balakrishnan 2012).

The distribution of government jobs was leading to ever new forms of classes in the society of Travancore. The poor Ezhavas, by and large living on weaving, farming, toddy tapping or coir matting, were not to be affected by the fact that a Nair from a similar position has started earning a monthly income of Rs5 from his job as a peon. The rich Ezhava or the Channar with his powers to arbitrate issues involving theft, assault or insult and even with a limited power to punish the guilty, would not digest the newly earned status of the poor Nair. This sentiment, of the status or the lack of it that accrues from a government job and salary proved to be the factor that initially bound the Ezhava together as a class, politically starting them off on a path to struggle for their rights (Balakrishnan 2012). The reaction from the rich minority of the Ezhava in choosing Kumaranasan as the first secretary of the SNDP Yogam was mainly due to the reason that he came from a family with very little wealth or fame. But Narayana Guru had him prepared to face this resistance by having him educated in Calcutta and granting him into the guardianship of Dr Palpu in Bangalore. Still, he was to face opprobrium, as evident from the discrimination he faced during a marriage where some Ezhava boycotted the occasion citing the participation of a lowly member (perumkuti) of their own caste. The Yogam therefore could not have been possible without the foresight shown by Narayana Guru and Palpu in choosing Kuamaranasan for the post of its first secretary.

A disciple of Narayana Guru who gave a political orientation to the SNDP movement and also spearheaded the Yogam's movement against caste was K. Aiyappan. He was steadfast about the gaining of representative seats for the Ezhava in the Travancore assembly. Although pioneering in terms of having started a community-based organization, the Ezhava were left behind in terms of representation in the governing bodies of the state. There was a consistent campaign led by Aiyappan for this as a result of which the Travancore state opened its Assembly to the Ezhava. The setting aside of seats was only a means to declare the path to political freedom. It is important to note that Aiyappan had at the time of independence concluded that the Yogam need not struggle to gain political representation any longer because it can only result in power struggle. He rather wanted the Yogam to focus on the community-oriented work. As his biographer recalls, the SNDP leadership's own decisions to act otherwise, i.e., to convert the community into a votebank has led to considerable disintegration in its values and principles (Karthikeyan 2012).

### **Conclusion: Deification, not Sanskritization**

Narayana Guru's effort in setting up a number of new temples where all could worship, brought enormous reprieve to the Ezhava who were allowed only at a distance in the Savarna temples. The removal of fear in using the temple premises brought a new vigor into the community. To what extent did it contribute towards actual removal of ritual distances which marked limits of purity and impurity is still a relevant question. Various acts and laws were also passed to this effect by the Government of Madras and the states of Travancore and Cochin. They, however, failed in bringing about radical changes in practices relating to caste and pollution. The attempts of Narayana Guru were, however, successful in reducing the psychological distance between devotees and the deity (Aiyappan 1965). The field of ritual specialization in the conduct of upper-caste Hindu rituals is still under the control of the Nambutiri Brahmins. This monopoly has continued also because of the conservative opinion in the state among other non-Brahmin castes that in such matters tradition should not be disturbed.

Aiyappan (1965), an Ezhava anthropologist, wrote about Guru that he was so popular because he identified the caste system as a pathological system afflicting Hinduism and campaigned for its removal. Guru instead of being a reformer of the Ezhava is thus recognized as one among the many such Gurus who have in history performed the task of ridding Hinduism of its various evils, a view which is also supported by K. Aiyappan, Guru's disciple who maintained that it did not even matter to Guru which religion was to be improved. Guru's solitary emphasis on the removal of caste was not restricted to Hinduism. He would have said the same to Christians or even Muslims. The reason why he chose to say, "one caste, one religion, one god" was perhaps this, i.e., one must remove the obstacle of caste from one's path for any religion to be known or any god to be worshipped (Balakrishnan 2012)

Sanskritization is a compelling motif to describe the transformations brought about by Guru so far as the lower castes, especially the Ezhava, are concerned (Osella and Osella 2000). The concept first used by sociologist M. N. Srinivas indicated the conscious changing of practices of worship amongst the lower castes to imitate the upper castes, especially Brahmin. This implied a movement towards vegetarianism and worship of Brahminical deities. The movement started by Guru had both these characteristics. Srinivas had implied a movement towards a ritually purer status by an economically powerful section by this concept. The achievements of the SNDP Yogam were also to a similar effect in giving to the elite from the Ezhava a sense of evenness with the rest of the Hindus. But all this notwithstanding, a proper room to accommodate the different polemics around caste that the Guru led, Sanskritization proves a grossly inadequate

concept. The intent of the Yogam was not to rise in the hierarchy of caste (although it may have no doubt contributed to it), but to rise over and above the system of caste itself. It is in accounting for this singular factor in which the theory of Sanskritization fails in respect of Narayana Guru and his reforms.

On a conceptual note, if one were to address the installations of different gods carried out by Narayana Guru they may occur to you as technologies of deification (Wakankar 2010). This was indeed a radical step to take for a lower-caste Ezhava, to make an installation of an upper-caste god, speaking especially of the Aruvippuram temple where he claimed he had installed the Ezhava Siva. This clearly marks an entry by the untouchable subject into political society. But the question it immediately poses is whether the different installations carried out by Guru all concur with this claim. It is true that he saw temples as places where a secular community could be organized. He even justified the use of temples for promotion of health and education. He did carry out such a mission in Sivagiri, but the installations spoke a language altogether different of the articulation of politics.

Narayana Guru, in his time, built around 60 temples in Kerala. Beginning with Aruvippuram, in all these temples he also started teaching to young students the classics in Sanskrit. This did not mean that he was against the imparting of education in the modern subjects. In fact, all the temples started schools with this aim. The techniques of Guru to instrumentalize temples for secular purposes with words written over it pronouncing them to be places where no religion or caste is practiced indicate the rhetoric of a politics of the Ezhava which he had begun, and which went on to become the major plank for the raising of separate reservation for the Ezhava in the state assemblies of Travancore. But even then, one does not fully comprehend what technologies of deification were followed by him in the diverse installations he had made in these temples.

But his dream of building secular institutions around temples were soon betrayed by the members of the Ezhava community who began to fence the temples from use by other communities/castes. This even led to a point where Guru retorted, "I am not your caste. I have no caste. I belong to the caste of human beings" (Balakrishnan 1954). The fact that these lines were quoted by a disciple of Guru, C. N. N. Menon, belonging to higher caste Nairs makes it even more relevant. He had followed Narayana Guru for a long time as Dharmateertha, but later converted to Christianity to become John Dharmathirthar. He says that Narayana Guru was extremely disappointed with the devotees in his temples adopting means of worship followed in the upper-caste temples. So much so that, he was led to exclaim that the presence of God is to be ensured in one's own heart and one should not seek it in a temple. It was with this revelation that he went into his last installation of a mirror in the temple.

So, it shows a gradual disenchantment with the way he launched the technology of deification as a revolutionary step. Yet Guru never retraced his steps and led the movement to its logical conclusion with the installation of the mirror. This was an initiation of the large majority of the untouchable population in the state of Kerala into political society.

If it was the intention of Guru to gradually wean the Ezhava away from the worship of lower deities like Marutha and Chathan, it was also his intention to substitute their means of worship with more "refined" ways. Guru by himself did not preach the devotion of any particular deity while doing all these. As it seems, it was his intention primarily to demonstrate the different ways of worshipping God. It was in a sense the technologies of deification that mattered to him more than the faith itself. The range of his activities in this phenomenon is visible in the differences in the kinds of worship he instituted for his different installations. If he allowed for specific rites in the Sivagiri temple for Siva, he left Saradamathom as a place reserved for meditations. In the Advaita Asramam that he built near Alwaye he neither built any temple, nor made any instal-

lation. While his reply to the Brahmin who questioned the installation of Siva at Aruvippuram is famous, his response to a query by a Brahmin astrologer if he had consulted an astrologer to verify if the time for installation was auspicious or not, was that it is not before but after a child is born that the time is confirmed as auspicious or not. It is obvious that a devotion of disinterestedness (Nirgun bhakti) and the path of Nivritti as opposed to Pravritti is powerfully moving his thoughts while continuing to install deities and build temples for them. This is also true of his act of putting a mirror in place of an idol and a piece of wood with words extolling virtues like truth, charity, love and righteousness written on it (Murukkumpuzha temple). Towards the end of his life, while the movement started by Narayana Guru was beginning to transform itself into a craze with several people approaching him to perform installations for them, his reply was that the need today is felt more not for temples, but institutions which can train children to take up industrial work (Balakrishnan 2012).

Such variation in approach therefore marked a deep sense of negation within the ambit of religion (Bhakti). But to the extent of challenging the Brahmins' privileges to worship, or faith in Hinduism and the untouchable response to it in the form of a suspension of iconoclasm (and an initiation into action) to mark the entry into political society, are Guru's ideas credible is a question that we must now dare to ask?

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# 8

## E. V. RAMASAMI PERIYAR ON CASTE-SOCIETY AND CATEGORY-WISE RIGHTS

*G. Aloysius*

### **Periyar intervenes**

It would hardly be an exaggeration to say that but for E. V. Ramasami Periyar's indefatigable and tireless efforts throughout his life, but more particularly in the very first year of the enactment of the Indian Constitution, the caste-oppressed groups of this country would not be enjoying today the kind of "reservation" in education and employment and continuing the struggle for more just allocation of power, positions and opportunities. This is one of the lasting contributions of the great stalwart of modern India for the empowerment of the majority people not only of Tamil Nadu but of the whole country. The point is not that if Periyar had not intervened at the opportune time, some other forces would not have, but in the course of the events that have actually unfolded themselves in recent history, it was Periyar's crucial role that to a large extent, determined the positive outcome in the early years of the nation state formation. And this fact has gone mostly unrecorded in the so-called mainstream academic memories and discussions, even of the subaltern kind.

The story is of the socio-political circumstances surrounding the very first amendment of the Indian Constitution in 1951. At the insistence of the Indian National Congress, a Constitutional Assembly for the nation-to-be, had been hastily put together in 1946 under the ambiguous auspices of and severe constraints imposed by the receding colonial masters and this was done on the basis of the extremely limited franchise obtaining then. Periyar clearly saw that something was amiss and wrote and spoke vigorously against this semi-clandestine and unseemly hasty process of appropriation of power even before independence, by the largely Brahminical Indian National Congress.<sup>1</sup> Conducted mostly as an internal affair of the Indian National Congress, the Assembly with the legitimacy gained through mass representatives like Ambedkar, produced a massive and mixed-up document which almost deified individual freedom and liberties and resolutely dismantled the colonial regime of multiple rights and representations based on social categories (Austin 1966). It is indeed intriguing how and why the so-called nationalists who had incessantly been preaching "communitarian ideals," (that is varna/caste and religion) as the timeless and priceless discovery and genius of this land in contrast to the ideals of individualism and free competition (that is, liberties and freedom of the individual) imposed by the colonizers, turned overnight votaries of individual liberty!<sup>2</sup> Be

that as it may, the Constitution of India was drafted, discussed, finalized, submitted and became the law of the land on January 26, 1950.

On July 27, 1950, after exactly six months, the Madras High Court delivered a judgment striking down the Madras government's scheme of category-wise admission to professional colleges, popularly known as the Communal G. O., an *ultra vires* of the new constitution. The Supreme Court of India confirmed this judgment on April 9, 1951. A Brahmin lady of Madras, Champakam Durairajan, had initiated the judicial process complaining that her "Fundamental Rights" for admission to medical college were infringed upon, by this social category-wise scheme of Madras. That is, she complained that the entire 100 percent possibility of admission was not made available to her as a citizen, to be evaluated and decided upon purely on the basis of "merit;" that she was discriminated against merely because of her caste and that others of lesser merit were admitted under considerations of caste, community, etc. As individual liberty and rights under the name of "Fundamental Rights," are the most supreme consideration of the Indian Constitution, the honorable judges found that the Madras Communal GO reserving places for different social categories was *ultra vires* of the Constitution and therefore held, illegal. In short, what was being challenged was the principle of the so-called reservation itself!

At this point, we could highlight a few facts which would better our critical understanding of the situation. First of all, Champakam Durairajan was not at all an applicant of any medical institution and thus had no *locus standi* in the case. The Supreme Court was indeed aware of this but citing the fact that the advocate on behalf of the Madras Government, V. K. T. Chari, did not press the issue, went ahead to deliver the judgment in the applicant's favor! Secondly, the advocate pleading the case of the lady also knew this but went ahead with the case; it is not then difficult under the circumstances to surmise who indeed was the real applicant. The situation was made more piquant by the fact that the advocate representing the applicant was none other than Alladi Krishnaswami Iyer, a member of the Constituent Assembly, a member of the Drafting Committee of the Constitution along with Ambedkar and subsequently a member of the unelected, first Parliament. Thirdly, what the Supreme Court struck down through its judgment was an aspect of regional governance, an administrative-political practice in place for 30-odd years in Tamil Nadu (*Champakam Durairajan vs State of Madras 1951*).

Taking advantage of and in consonance with the colonial view of Indian society as a congeries of castes and communities, the Justice Party which had come to power in 1920, had inaugurated the scheme of distributing positions, resources and educational opportunities through a social category-wise scheme, thus undercutting the persistent monopoly-stranglehold of the Brahmins on the provincial administration and professional education (Irschick 1969). This scheme in the concrete situation was considered as an indispensable aspect of democratization of the caste-ridden society. Fourthly, though it was the Congress, which was in power in Madras then and which all along had been against any sort of group rights/reservation, was against the as it were, forced to go in appeal to the Supreme Court. Further, it must be noted what exactly the Supreme Court was striking down in the Champakam Durairajan case, for, we are told by Marc Galanter,

On the same day, in *Venkataranamma vs State of Madras*, the Court struck down part of a similar communal quota in regard to government posts. Article 16(4) it found, permitted reservations only for Backward Classes. The Court concluded, that of the groups on the Madras list, only Harijans and "Backward Hindus," could be said to be Backward Classes. The reservations for these groups were allowed, the others struck down.

(Galanter 1984)

And again,

An earlier case in the Punjab High Court upheld reserved seats for Harijans in the educational institutions on the ground that Article 46 must be taken as an exception to Article 29(2) ... and thus the State could Constitutionally promote the educational interests of the Scheduled Castes by adopting a system of reservations.

(Galanter 1984, p. 366)

Reading these facts together, as well as later judicial interpretations on similar cases, it could be easily inferred that while the harshness involved in the Champakam case certainly included also the so-called “backward classes,” the main thrust was against the specific quota system evolved in the course of recent history in the Madras Presidency. It is necessary to keep this in mind in order to understand Periyar’s attitude towards the question as well as the new socio-political trajectory of the emerging nation state.

All hell broke loose all over southern India at the judgment of the Madras High Court striking down the historically evolved scheme of power-sharing among the castes and communities not only in the state of Madras but also in the neighboring states. However, it was the Tamil-speaking world which was affected most and hence confronted the situation headlong. Periyar immediately declared resistance, called on the youngsters to leave schools and colleges and take to the streets. August 14, 1950, was to be the day of category-wise rights—“the students should not attend schools, businessmen should not open their shops, but all should come and participate in the procession.” Beginning from then on, the whole of Tamil Nadu stood as one man, mobilizing non-violent resistance, condemning the judgment and clamoring for the restoration of the Communal GO (Viduthalai 1950). Nearly three decades of administrative and recruitment practice under colonial rule had created a structure of vested interests and established some kind of *modus vivendi* among the highly fragmented social groups, now taken to struggle for the appropriation the public benefits. As mentioned above, it was the Congress Party which was then running the government, with one Kumaraswami Raja as the Chief Minister and K. Kamaraj as the President of the Tamil Nadu Congress Committee. However, as Periyar pointed out time and again, both these individuals were non-Brahmins and had themselves benefited enormously from the movement for category-wise rights. But the situation had turned them now into mere anxious but helpless spectators. The initiative clearly was with Periyar and the entire populace seemed to be ranged behind his leadership.

Periyar’s declaration of resistance to the court judgment in the second half of 1950 was neither sudden nor unexpected. It must be seen as a logical continuity with and to an extent culmination of his nearly three decades of socio-political critique of the activities of the nationalist movement and the current methods of state-formation. As events were unfolding, Periyar’s criticism and even his worst fears were being confirmed one by one. He was indeed aware that even before independence and as it became clear that the British were withdrawing, the state had started dismantling the colonial scheme of group-rights (*Kudi Arasu*, June 22, 1946, June 1, 1949, and June 25, 1949). Both as an enthusiastic insider first for six or seven long years and then on, as an outsider, a bitter critic of the nationalist movement, Periyar realized that the emergent social polity was increasingly being cast in the Brahminical/discriminatory mold that is, exclusivist and elitist. As power was being devolved from British to Indian hands, it was being systematically cornered by the Brahminical cluster of castes to the exclusion of all the others and the most obvious proof of this was the nationalist movement’s consistently negative stand on the distribution of positions, jobs and educational opportunities among the different communities. This was again supplemented by the nationalist movement’s resistance to all forms of social reforms moving away from Brahminical dominance in society, culture and religion. It was this socio-political “closure” by the colonially

valorized Brahminical elite of this country, that had consistently been the target of his attack.<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, he could not view the independence of the country as the dawn of mass deliverance; he could not take the enactment of the constitution as mass affirmation; and along the same lines, he could not celebrate the present judgment either, as the bursting forth of “liberal democracy” in this country. On the other hand, the judgment gave him the sure indication of the sectarian nature of the nation-to-be and the degraded position of the majority population—Shudras and other relegated castes in it. Thus, it was the long-accumulated ideological fury of the leader, which informed and inspired the current movement.

The most important aspect of Periyar’s mobilizational thrust was his explanation that this judgment was not an isolated or stray incident, but part and parcel of a larger and long-term design of the Brahminical elite to deny self-respect and fair share of the multitudinous castes and social groups, degraded within the system as the Shudras, either as Hindu or otherwise. The Brahminical, which was traditionally dominant in the religio-cultural spheres only in certain parts of the country, in the wake of modernity also came to acquire secular powers, thanks to the British and began to view itself along with the colonizers as the Aryan, distinct from and superior to the mass of people in the subcontinent. As Aryan, they also became the typical of the northern-Sanskritic part of India. Periyar saw and explained the systematic dominance and exploitation of the non-Brahmin-Dravidian south by the self-defined Aryan-Brahminical-Sanskritic north. This was a historical and experiential conclusion of Periyar and the present judgments of the courts were in his view but an instance of this larger scheme of things. Nearly three decades of struggle for the abolition of caste and achievement of fair share for all the castes, had slowly but surely convinced him that none of his ideals was possible in India, a socio-political entity that has been constructed through the combined and collusive efforts of the local Brahminical castes and the imperial British. From the 1940s, he had begun to think and speak of separate and sovereign Dravida Nadu of the Tamil speaking peoples, if casteless-ness as the organizational principle within society was to be achieved. In this way, Periyar’s mobilization of resistance to the court judgments of the early 1950s was linked and expanded to the theme of the north, that is, the caste-affirming Aryan, versus the south, that is the caste-negating Dravidian. Added to this was the suggestion that a fair share of power for all castes in the event of caste not being abolished was not possible within the colonially unified India and the route for emancipation lay in a separate and sovereign south Indian state. It was this deadly myth-historical and political mix that fueled the resistance movement of the day under his leadership. It was this, once again that seemed to have sent a shiver down the spine of the leaders of Madras and sent them scurrying to Delhi for succor. It appears that Vallabhai Patel, who visited the state sometime around this time, also advised the top leadership in Delhi to do something in the matter. Both Madras and Delhi were being ruled by an overwhelming majority of Congressmen opposed from the very beginning to all forms of group rights. But this majority in the legislative bodies was literally paralyzed when confronted with the massive groundswell of resistance sustained for months.

When the issue was brought in for discussion in the Parliament in May 1951, the generally hostile mood of the house was expressed by Pandit Thakur Das Bhargava, who championed the cause of the “Scheduled Castes” but opposed the inclusion of the others:

But supposing the Madras Government notification about the reservation of seats in Universities etc., is sought to be maintained by the backdoor method and some classes who are not backward are brought in as backward then I am very much against it ... If by this backdoor method the Government of Madras wants seats reserved for the non-Brahmin and other classes, I am opposed to it.

*(Parliamentary Debates 1950–2)*

Nehru's fear was that conceding to the demands of the agitationists, would be seen as giving quarters to "communalism;" he therefore took the trouble of explaining that conceding to the backward communities was not the same as promoting communalism. One gets the impression that Mr Nehru himself understood this distinction for the first time in his life, thanks to the massive ground mobilization and the visiting dignitaries from Madras. But the attitude of the members from the south was clear and assertive. Mr Ramalingam Chettiar of Madras emphasized the seriousness of the situation in Tamil Nadu; and Messrs Shankaraiah and Ethirajulu Naidu from Mysore explained that the problem was not limited to Tamil Nadu but extended to the entire south—the states of Mysore, Travancore-Cochin and even Bombay (Parliamentary Debates 1950–2, pp. 8998–9001; 9037–9). Dr Deshmukh, "saw the regional origin as a question of time-lag; the problem was not confined to Madras, but was bound to arise elsewhere as the Backward Classes became more aware and assertive (Galanter 1984). But what finally moved the matter forward was expressed somewhat cryptically and ominously by Mr Nehru himself: "The House knows very well and there is no need for trying to hush it up, that this particular matter in the particular shape arose because of certain happenings in Madras" (Galanter 1984 p. 9615). And this he said, in spite of the fact, "We are alive to the possibility of this kind of thing being used for a particular purpose to which we are opposed" (Galanter 1984, p. 9619). Reviewing the whole process, Professor K. S. Chalam was to conclude later, "The Issue of the Other Backward Classes arose because of the implementation of the Communal GO in the Madras Presidency in 1925–26 and the demand for its continuance in the post-Independence period." The first amendment to the Constitution, passed on June 2, along with other matters, with 243 members supporting and five opposing this clause, introduced a new clause, clause (4) to article (15): "Nothing in Article 15 or Article 29(2) ... shall prevent the State from making any special provision for the advancement of any socially and educationally backward classes of citizens or for the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes." The learned professor points out to the irony of the situation:

The Constituent Assembly had rejected the inclusion in the original Constitution of a provision similar to Article 15.<sup>4</sup> Now the same assembly, in its incarnation as the provisional Parliament, passed it with little opposition, on the ground that it was needed to empower the State to carry out the Directive Principles by insuring that the Fundamental Rights' guarantees of equality did not obstruct substantive equalization.

(Galanter 1984)

Enough has been written about the limited, tentative and exceptional nature of the newly introduced provision and how its intent is to enable the state and not to invest any right on the backward classes themselves. Be that as it may, from the point of view of Periyar, this first amendment to the Constitution, though, seemed to have been an immediate victory, neutralizing the socio-political crisis that had been triggered by the court judgments, had ambiguous consequences. The Madras government was compelled to recast its scheme of "power-distribution" into one of "reservation" for the backwards. The rest of this chapter is an attempt to explicate this ambiguity and the resultant reorientation by elaborating Periyar's idea and practice of category-wise rights as the suitable scheme for a revalorized caste-ridden society.

## Colonial transformations and peoples' responses

### *Consolidation and structuration of Brahminical casteism*

Ideas, policies and articulations—legal, artistic, religious, political or otherwise, are all intricately and inevitable intertwined with actual changes and practices in the material and productive world. And so are the ideas and articulations concerning, labeling and treating groups as backward as well as those contesting such practices. The point of utmost importance for the purpose at hand, is what happened to the pre-modern society here with the entry of British colonialism. This and several other related questions revolve around the central issue of how the subcontinent entered modernity within the constraints as well as the auspices of the conquering foreign elite. The new consensus among the historiographers and sociologists on this point is that colonialism unilaterally and indiscriminately *valorized* the Brahminical way and view of life which had already managed to become dominant in the valley areas of the subcontinent, in precolonial days; Brahminism as a way and view of life and the Brahmins as the consolidated and preeminent class, at the subcontinental level, had emerged only under the British rule.<sup>5</sup> This question of “valorization” of the Brahmins and Brahminical order of things under colonialism needs further explanation and also interpretation.

The local Brahminical elite and the invading British colonialists together had cooked up an image of India which was singular, organic, spiritual and basically Aryan-Brahminical. In this vision of the subcontinent, known as the “Orientalist,” society here was conceptualized as monolithically and ahistorically stratified into a single hierarchical system of Varna as depicted in the Brahminical texts, and this presumed that this singular stratification had been naturalized long ago, making it functional and therefore positive to society; all other contesting, alternative and autonomous traditions of the subcontinent were seen and treated as branches emanating from, subservient to and eventually subsumed within this basic Aryan-Vedic-Brahminical. In the 19th century, this was known as the “tradition” among the intelligentsia in India. It was only with the coming of the British, the story went, that this system was disturbed. This disturbance was again viewed and evaluated negatively by the emergent nationalist leadership for its political purposes, but positively by those at the bottom of the social ladder who hoped to gain from this transition. This picture has been accepted and reproduced by and large by the academics also. The demand for and discourse on “reservation,” which arose early enough, were also located within this larger framework. The possible position of those demanding reservation within this naturalized Vedic-Brahminical social hierarchy has, singularly been based on the plea of similarly naturalized and also deeply interiorized relegation, marginalization, suppression, depression and also recognition and acceptance of ascriptive inferiority and lowliness!

In contrast to this, the insights generated by the new historiography on the other hand, assert that the very “tradition,” taken so easily for granted, has been but the creation and construction of collusive colonialism and is not much older than that. The new explanation goes like this: The incoming British, having finished off the rajas and maharajas, looked around for possible sources and brokers of revenue, the very purpose for which they had come here, and their eyes fell on the harvest-rich valleys and the better organized Brahminical communities there. These communities the British identified as the possible intermediaries and “settled” with them the conquered land, so that they became responsible for the uninterrupted payment of land revenue. This, what began basically as land settlement only, very soon turned out to be a general, but silent and comprehensive contract between the two parties and a simplistic method of ruling, encompassing all spheres of the old as well as the newly emergent areas

of collective life. The British promised and to a great extent practiced non-interference, the Brahminical paid the land revenue and all other matters became subsidiary to and subsumed within this. To facilitate revenue collection and transfer, the trading British found it fitting and proper merely to do the bidding of the local elite and back them up in all matters. The local elite for their part termed anything in which it did not want the British to interfere as “custom and tradition,” which became a catch-all phrase to refer to and desist from changing what the Brahminical elite thought India was or ought to be! For a whole century, that is from 1757 to 1857, the East India Company preferred the policy of “non-interference,” followed the lead of the local elite in matters of ruling, adjudication, collection of data and imagining the society and culture here. What subsequently came to be viewed as the *tradition*, including social relations and religion of the subcontinent, and later upheld and celebrated by the nationalists and still later, faithfully reproduced by the academics came only to be thus constructed and projected in the course of the non-interfering but indiscriminately supporting British company rule. This was also the period, and this is important for our purpose, when all pluralities and diversities of the subcontinent—alternative, autonomous and counter traditions of culture, economy and politics—came to be subsumed under the single, grand, seamless, but collusively produced imaginary of the Vedic-Brahminical. Such a subsumption to be sure, primarily meant the disempowerment of all diverse traditions on the one hand, and unilateral re-empowerment in modernity of the singular Vedic-Brahminical on the other. Further, the Vedic-Brahminical, in combination with, empowered by and consolidated and projected through colonialism, in a new *avatar* as it were, became the sole standard and criterion of the good, beautiful and useful in the subcontinent. The specific and historically evolved skills or non-skills of the Brahminical communities, getting dovetailed with the emerging state infrastructure, became the only recognized criteria of merit and efficiency for all employments irrespective of their diverse natures and requirements. All other characteristics, talents, forms of knowledge, methods, interests, ideals and aspirations of the subcontinent evolved and developed over the long past, came to be viewed and treated as secondary, inferior and unimportant. This fusion of interests between the native and foreign elite, retrieved the valley-restricted Brahminical casteism into modernity, turned it structural and functional to the new and emerging subcontinent-wide state and society.

Within this new regime of the British-Brahminical combine, the non-Brahminical as well as the anti-Brahminical lost almost everything in every sphere, whatever they had historically achieved down the millennia-old struggles and histories. Issuance of land pattas transformed patta-holders into owners of the land, rendering all others virtually landless; hitherto autonomous cultural life of the diverse masses was brought under Brahminical control and adjudication; different worship patterns of communities were overtaken; temples came under the unilateral power of the Brahminical. The Brahminical here in short came to be viewed as the subcontinental parallel to the priestly and sacred within the Semitic traditions. If thus, all the traditional spheres of collective life of the masses came under the power, influence and determination of the few traditionally elite communities thanks to their collaborator status with the ruling and modernizing British, that very same process also blocked the entry of the masses into the new spheres—education, employment and representation. Colonial-aggrandized Brahminism not only indiscriminately and monopolistically characterized and occupied the new emergent spheres, but also blocked the entry of the diversified masses, who all came to be viewed and treated as Shudras within its new and colonially-abetted religious scheme of “Hinduism.” The Brahminical claimed monopoly association with the ruling British through education, employment and political representation also, because it claimed to belong to the same Aryan stock and therefore worthy, eligible and meritorious for such elevation. By the same token, the diversified

masses—the Shudras—were found to be of different and inferior stock and thus not eligible for such a privilege.

Valorization of the Brahminical under colonialism, consensually spoken of by the new set of scholars, means precisely this: What was limited to valley dominance became pan-Indian structural, and commensurate with the extent of the emerging state; the valley pattern of relatively rigid stratification became the ideological model for the entire country; with this, Brahminical communities were set up at the top everywhere; correspondingly, this brought the downfall of all other historically evolved diversities—traditions, forces, knowledge systems and practices and religio-cultural ideals; in collective and public life, the Brahminical—Brahmins and Brahminized—emerged supreme both in the traditional and emergent-modern spheres to the exclusion of the mass of people as the Shudras and therefore held unworthy.<sup>6</sup>

### ***Rise and consolidation of the “clerk” and “clerical”***

If the colonial transformations in respect of the social groups here, recast the entire society to the image and advantage of the Brahminical, it also effected a similar and parallel set of transformations in the bureaucratic, administrative and academic spheres. The progressive integration of the local Brahminical within the colonial bureaucracy and education at the junior levels first and then also at the senior levels, in a near-complete fashion transformed the very nature of the practices of ruling and administration. If as an inevitable process of modernization, salaried jobs came to be available in a big and systematic way for the first time here, all these jobs were systematically gobbled up by the Brahminical and thus brought within the control of its own genius. And these jobs—for every form of association with the British in their multiple practices of ruling were indeed looked upon as jobs—with the British even if it be at the lowest *chaprasi* level, went with enormous power and prestige among the ordinarily illiterate, fragmented and hence most often intimidated masses. And as the highest echelons of the traditional society, that is the Brahminical, were also the ones dominant in the scenario of government employment, the scope and extent of such employment kept on increasing and the salaries were continuously being boosted so high that they had no relation with the remunerations prevailing in other sectors; further, these employments themselves were being transformed into Brahminical. While the nationalist elite was complaining of disparity in salaries between them and the British, the more significant point was that these newly emerging colonial-bureaucratic and salaried jobs created a new class and set it above all other classes struggling to make their livelihood. The political economy of this class came to be not only at variance with that of the masses, but very often their interests were found to be identified with those of the rulers, against those of the masses. Thus emerged the typical “clerk” and “clerical,” supreme in cash power, status and privilege within the newly unified state and society. All other sectors of the economy slowly came to be under its constraining shadow and were being cast in an inferior and subservient status to this emergent and basically non-productive sector.

Discussions on political economic questions among the academicians and also the larger intelligentsia revolve mostly around the ownership of land and industries. Accordingly also, strategies for development and democracy are devised. But in modern India, as a continuity of the processes released under the auspices and controls of colonialism, it is the “government job,” whether it be educational-academic, administrative-adjudicative or elective-political, that holds the key to understanding the issue of substantial power relations here. With the emergence of the colonial clerk, drawn more often than not from the Brahminical classes, all sectors of what are usually considered aspects of political economy—land, business, industry, services, etc.—came to be under the near total control and determination of this “clerk”—a new species

born of the unholy wedlock between the Brahminical and British. This “clerkial” eminently was suited at once to both the colonial objectives and character and capabilities/non-capabilities of the Brahminical. Policies and programs of the state concerning the other sectors of economy also came to be determined according to the knowledge, experience, mental horizons and the interests of this bureaucratic class. Agriculture and industry here, now having to function and expand within the parameters of the clerical bureaucracy, clerical intelligentsia and again clerical politics, that is, the “government engaged,” soon turned non-productive and non-remunerative both in social and economic terms when compared with the latter. It became certainly more worthwhile to “invest” in becoming a government clerk, be it at the junior, senior or collector level, than to venture out into industry and business. And what few have emerged as business and industry, of necessity have to continually depend upon the whims, fancies and largesse of this “clerkial” government.<sup>7</sup>

And the Brahminical domination has assured that every job in the public sphere—productive, administrative, ruling, academic, educational, medical etc., all get transformed into a monolithic “clerkial” in nature and function. In other words, the Brahminical skill and character, shaped within the colonial practice, came to inform the variegated sectors, and transformed them into a single and non-productive mode of practice. It is this Brahminically monolithized character and practice in the workplace that came to be established and institutionalized as merit, efficiency and the sole requirement for recruitment, whatever the nature of the work needed. More specifically, two characteristics closely associated with the Brahminical came to inform, direct and determine these public employments. One is the heavy and one-sided emphasis on the literary skill and qualification in contrast to the technical-instrumental and productive-innovative, indiscriminately for all sorts of engagements. Second, is the contempt for and heavy discount of physical labor and the corresponding extremely biased evaluation of the mental labor, once again indiscriminately for all jobs. So much so, that even jobs requiring physical labor were filled in by people who demonstrated superior mental, mostly memorizing skills. These and such other characteristics of the Brahminical came to be inscribed into the very structure-culture of the emerging social polity and got themselves naturalized as the general or universal. As the most highly remunerated, lifetime guaranteed, least physical effort involved, socially prestigious, comfortably exclusive and elitist, this “government sector” became the most sought-after thing, in preference to all other productive and autonomous occupations. English literary education, once again the brainchild of the colonial-Brahminical combine became the sole requirement for entry into this money-power-prestige loaded realm. English and the skill to articulate in it became a substitute for any and every form of knowledge required for varied services. Class analysis of modern Indian society needs to begin right here, that is, the emergence and continued sway of the educational-employment potential and practice of the government sector. This became the sector *par excellence* of the colonially valorized modern Brahminical, meritorious, forward, successful and privileged. Sure indeed, those who were described as the Shudras were not only not allowed entry here but also could not qualify themselves through these highly skewed criteria and came to be dubbed as the backward, considered both educationally and socially.

### ***Specific Tamil social configuration***

If the above paragraphs tried to explain in a nutshell and tentative manner the process of colonial valorization of the Brahminical at the pan-Indian level, it is necessary to point out the special circumstances that obtained in the Tamil-speaking world from which Periyar emerged and within which he articulated. The colonial valorization of the Brahminical had differential

impact in and evoked differential response from across the diversely and unevenly developed cultural communities of the subcontinent. In some places, where the Brahminical had achieved near total dominance even in precolonial days, this latter-day process did not strike as unusual or extraordinary. In some other places, the Brahminical itself impacted in a more inclusive way so that adverse reaction did not become prominent. But where the Brahminical dominance and determination was the least in precolonial days, as it certainly was in the Tamil-speaking world for historical reasons, its colonial valorization was experienced as sudden, engulfing, totalistic, shocking and thereby proving equally bitter, massive and persistent reaction (Seal 1968).

As a slow, percolating process, the expanding and adverse inclusion of the Aryan-Brahminical became relatively thinner, weaker and minimal as it moved towards the southern parts of the country. The number of Brahmins had not been many here and premodern resistance to the Brahminical maximum; again, the difference and distance between the valley and dry areas being vast, the Brahminical was fairly well-contained within the relatively few and smaller river valleys. In the vast arid and semi-arid areas, which indeed characterized the Tamil region, values, ideals, aspirations, struggles, relationship patterns, ruling methods, worship styles and also historical-mythical imaginings, clearly other than the Brahminical flourished and even dominated (Dirks 1987). In other words, the Brahminical caste formation was far from complete here in precolonial days and this fact had provided enough space for the development of other traditions, forces, cultures forms of knowledge and methods of ruling.<sup>8</sup>

In this context, the valorization of the Brahminical under colonial auspices, was experienced as a sudden, violent and hence unwarranted break in the flow of history and an attempt to set at naught the hard-won gains of a long past. In other words, if the arrogating or usurping character of the colonially valorized Brahminical overtaking and suppressing all other traditions—interests, forms of knowledge and varieties of skills—was perceived and felt as sporadic, scattered and unorganized, in the south, particularly in the Tamil-speaking world, the same was experienced as pervasive, persistent and stringently organized. The aggrandizement of the Brahminical elite in the enlarged public sphere was felt particularly disturbing here because until recently, whatever went by its name was largely the realm of the non-Brahminical. Once again, the colonially valorized Brahminical here practiced “social closure” more strictly and severely than in other places, like for example in Bengal (Seal 1968). It sought to cast the entire populace in a single debased mold of the Shudras and backward! Backwardization of the masses, here as indeed it was elsewhere, was based on this disastrous combination of the traditional-Brahminical and modern-colonial. The traditional-Brahminical had latched on to the modern-colonial and this monstrous social hybrid turned at one stroke the entire country as inhabited by backward people. In this discursive reality, there indeed were certainly racial elements, historical accidents, myth-history makings, sectarian political maneuvering and much else. Such a colonially abetted process turned this land, at a single stroke as it were, into a country of the depressed and backward.

Within this new reading, the clamor and demand for a share of the power-privilege loaded public sphere of education, employment and political representation, need not be based only on the acknowledgment and acceptance of one’s ascriptive lowliness or avowed backwardness. It need not be a humble prayer for inclusion despite or precisely on account of backwardness/unworthiness. The “neo-Brahminical” in context need not be so easily taken for granted as the standard or criterion. Its aggrandizement and usurpation of the public need not be accepted as resulting from their individual merit or efficiency, nor the corollary of the backward condition of the masses be recognized as being real or innate. Sure enough, there was this stream of the clamor for reservation on account of ascriptive marginalization also. But, radical questions of political manipulation, religious dominance, unwarranted aggrandizement, and plain usurpation could be raised. Critique of unwarranted monopolization of power and resources and reli-

gio-cultural intimidation could be put forward. Proportionate sharing of power and resources among categories of population could be projected as the legitimate and unavoidable strategy for the democratization of a caste-ridden society. The share in the public could be had as of right and monopolization of the public sphere could be debunked as undeserved and destructive. And this exactly was what happened in the first half of the 20th century among the Tamil-speaking peoples of the Madras Presidency.

There has been extensive documentation to show how the Brahmins of the Madras Presidency at the beginning of the 20th century had monopolized both the spheres of education and employment, the two foundational spheres of modernity. On the prevailing disparity in the scenario of education, Eugene Irschick on the basis of detailed tables points out that “no non-Brahmin group could even approach them” (1969, p. 14); and of the Brahmins’ position in employment, the author speaks of the “almost exclusive control of government jobs and political life by the Brahmins” (1969, p. 17). This had triggered off two parallel sets of antagonistic reaction from two different quarters.

The company government after a whole century of literal subservience to the local Brahminical for the sake of revenue, found itself too entangled with it to the extent of near paralysis. Sometime around the middle of the 19th century, the rulers started feeling the necessity of disentangling themselves from the snares of the Brahminical and instructions, circulars and cautionary notes were afoot to the effect that the Brahminical was dominating the government, efforts should be made to avoid excessive and monopolistic recruitment of the Brahminical and that representation should be made to reflect the actual composition of the society, that is, newer clients should be sought if only for the sake of the survival of colonial rule (Radhakrishnan 1993). This policy became more aggressive particularly after the revolt of the 1857. Beware of the Brahminical and all that are implied therein became the new colonial policy.<sup>9</sup>

If this was the new policy for the second century of colonialism, the masses that had become the victim of the earlier policy—the generalized non-Brahminical—did not miss the chance to grasp this as the opportune time to strike out their demands and interests. The very under-development into which they had been pushed by the Brahmin-British combine itself was slowly emerging as the new template to escalate political mobilizations of counter nature. The generalized non-Brahminical, that is interests represented by those who subsequently came to be called the minorities, tribes, backwards, scheduled castes etc., all of them rose as one man across the country, protesting against the colonially imposed liabilities and disabilities under the new regime. While sociology and anthropology have concentrated on the study of these individual movements, the social sciences as a whole have failed to ferret out their structural and cultural implication.<sup>10</sup> Be that as it may, as suggested above, the rise of the non-Brahminical and its demand for its share in the social-polity that was emerging then was most aggressive in the Madras Presidency and particularly among the Tamil-speaking peoples. Periyar’s engagement with these issues and the formulations he came up with are better viewed against this historical and macro-level scenario.

### **Discursive context of the demand for category-wise rights**

When Periyar entered the political arena sometime in 1919, there were already set practices and discourses concerning group or category-wise rights. It was in negotiation with these varied practices and discourses, that he challenged the dominant ones, reshaped the others and developed his own idea of category-wise rights as suitable for the subcontinent. At the newly unified state level, colonialism had already initiated certain practices based on its own perception of the social and group relations here. In contrast to the “positive orientalist” image of the subconti-

ment as a seamless, single and grand unfolding of organic-spiritual civilization, the British in the course of administering the land and people had also developed this idea that the subcontinent is but a congeries of castes, communities, cults and other groups, unfit for territory-based and homogenized individual rights. And this has been known in the literature as “negative orientalism” (Fox 1989). Accordingly, ever since the British began the process of integrating the native elements in administration, even before the start of political reforms, they did so in terms of disaggregated groups, groups both ascriptive and achieved, groups representing different interests and groups as and when they mobilized and demanded a share in public life. The contour of such an irregular, partial and uneven integration of the natives was determined by various factors as mostly pressures exerted by the groups themselves. Given the relatively autonomous nature of the provincial administration, the situation varied from region to region.

However, on a pan-Indian basis, the Muslims had early demanded and got separate community rights for themselves, and these were integrated within the political reforms of 1909. The reasons they had adduced in their demand were several, some historical and others political. With the formation of the colonially abetted concept of Hinduism as the religion of the majority here, the Muslims automatically became a minority. And as a “religious minority” they were recognized and became entitled to separate group rights. The reference to and contrast with, was the emergent Hinduism fast becoming politically unified and aggressive. This was a prominent political phenomenon in the north, and as such it exerted deep and wide influence everywhere but also in the Madras Presidency and continued to be a bone of contention until the very end. “Minority discourse,” a discourse based on the “otherness” or religious “difference” of the group-concerned constituted one of the significant aspects of this ongoing issue of what has come to be understood as “reservation.”

Within the Presidency itself, the processes of political economy delineated above had given birth to two different streams of discourse demanding recognition of group-rights. Demand for separate and concessional treatment on the basis of historical marginalization and ascriptive lowliness within the Brahminical system was raised in the Presidency early enough. As early as the beginning of the 19th century, those who within the Brahminical system were known as the untouchable castes had sent in petitions for reservations in education and employment and somewhat later for political representation. By the second half of the century as their contour emerged more clearly as the Depressed Classes, their political mobilizations came to be expressed in many concrete ways—organization, media efforts, group-consultative conversions to other religions, etc. With the formations of the casteless Dravida Maha Jana Sabha initiated by Pandit Iyothee Thassar, Adi-Dravida Maha Jana Sabha of M. C. Rajah and Paraiyar Maha Jana Sabha of R. Srinivasan to mention only the prominent few, in the 1890s, their distinct political consciousness and demand for their share in public life based on historical marginalization and current discrimination came to be clearly articulated.<sup>11</sup> Not only the demand arose this early, the provincial government too, had responded positively to these demands from the bottom of the social ladder. Their political subjectivity of the kind that would soon become an all-India phenomenon thus emerged quite early and prior to many other political developments in Tamil Nadu and elsewhere. And this stands well within the logic of the newly aggravated caste system under the auspices of colonialism. This discourse clearly stood on the perception and experience of discrimination, past and/or present (Kamalanathan 1985).

Demand for a share in the newly emergent public sphere in the Madras Presidency not only arose from the bottom of the social ladder on the basis of ascriptive lowliness but also from the colonially dethroned top section, the “non-Brahmins,” not as a humble plea for the removal of marginalization, but as a challenge to the colonially elevated Brahminism, from a relative position of social and economic power. Though some semi-political activities of the non-Brahmins

could be traced to earlier years, the flag was unfurled by the end of 1916, with the publication of the *Non-Brahmin Manifesto*.

The *Manifesto*, claiming to speak on behalf of the entire non-Brahmin community, begins with highlighting the fact that

not less than forty of the forty and a half millions who form the population of this Presidency are the Non-Brahmins, and the bulk of the taxpayers, including a large majority of the zamindars, landholders and agriculturalists also belong to the same class. But in what passes for politics in Madras they have not taken the part to which they are entitled ... Their political interests therefore (as compared with those of the Brahmins who number only about a million and a half) have materially suffered.

Thereupon the text explains the near-monopolistic dominance of the Brahmins in all areas of collective life in general and the government employment in particular, how this socially rigid caste, through united action maintains its dominance and social closure against all the others, in any form of recruitment, through patronage or open competition. The *Manifesto* acknowledges the importance of skills in passing tests but expresses its surprise, how could talents be limited entirely to one particular community? It further explains that this near monopoly of the Brahmins is maintained on the combined strength of their traditional religious authority and steady access to English education. It calls upon the non-Brahmin communities to unite, mobilize, go for education and achieve parity and equality with the Brahmins, which alone would bring about a meaningful nation-building. The political sidelight of the text is its discouragement of home rule which under the current circumstances would only mean Brahmin rule (Irschick 1969).

While the differences between the two streams of demands emanating from the two extremes of the social ladder could easily be enumerated, one ought not to forget the many intermediary and inter-related positions in the concrete. While the former concentrated on itself—its own “backwardness,” the latter pointed out to the unwarranted monopoly of the Brahmins and their own lack of representation as the reasons of their demand. Accordingly, the orientation, strategies and goals were different in both the cases. Within the framework then, of granting group-rights by the colonizers, there were at least three identifiable sets of demands emanating from different vantage points.

This selective delineation of the discursive context would certainly not be complete, if it did not highlight the attitude and articulation of the Brahminical, slowly but systematically taking over the state power from the beginning of the 20th century. On account of its century-long contractual collaboration with the trader-colonialists, the Brahminical as we have suggested above, came to achieve near-monopoly social and administrative power, but also more importantly impress the aspects of administration with its own ethos and skills. But now, this new colonial practice of granting group rights to whomever exerted pressure, appeared to it as directed against itself. In its own bloated idiom, the British, through their new practice of granting group rights was targeting and scuttling the rising “nationalism.” Therefore, turning anti-colonial as well as anti- all those aspiring groups, the Brahminical consistently stood against all forms of group rights, viewed the new and colonially created political unity of India as singular and homogenous, considered itself as the sole and legitimate representative of the entirety and any concession of group rights as surrender to communalism not compatible with the high-pedestalled “nationalism” being articulated by themselves. Having literally highjacked public life and government jobs and deeply impressed them both with its own ethos and skills, the Brahminical could now easily perceive and project itself as the “standard,” that is the “forward” and vanguard

of the emergent “liberal democratic” and branded all demands for group rights as unworthy of the noble task of building the liberal democratic and social polity.

However, this pretentious ideology of the Brahminical had to dovetail itself to the concrete history and politics, had to compromise with the historically evolved practices and the demands of the day—of the Muslims, Depressed Classes and non-Brahminical groups—in order to get over the developing political impasse. Its strategy of accommodation, co-option, concession or whatever one chooses to call it was to cast the entire non-Brahminical populace—Muslim or non-Muslim—as “backward.” Just as in the social realm, thanks to British collaboration and suppressing historically evolved diversities, the same populace was cast in the mold of the “Shudras” of the single textual caste system, now in the administrative sphere, the majority was being turned into “backward.” In other words, the multiple discourses, that of minority, discriminatory and challenge to the monopoly of the diversified masses were all sought to be contained within the Brahminically dominant as a single backward classes discourse. This was of course, nothing but the same old Brahminical re-legitimizing itself in and through the modern administrative scenario. The peremptory command of the dominant Brahminical to the masses was to fall in line with its own hegemony: Demand for group rights could be raised only through the acceptance and demonstration of backwardness. And this backwardness and its corresponding demand for separate recognition could only be a temporary, exceptional and shifting measure only for a few in contrast to the normal, standard, permanent, universal and individuated of the Brahminical now projecting itself as the liberal democratic. In other words, the collusively and colonially backwardized was to be permanently under the dominance as well as hegemony of the Brahminical in the emerging India. It was towards such a discursive configuration that the multitudinous struggles for group rights were being pushed when Periyar came on the scene.

## **Periyar and category-wise rights**

### ***From political biography***

It was indeed significant that Periyar entered the provincial political scenario, sometime during late 1917, after a fruitful stint in public life at Erode, through the Madras Presidency Association, an organization set up by the non-Brahmins of the Tamil Nadu branch of the Indian National Congress with the objective of protecting their interests. The organization’s immediate goal was to secure the “communal representation” of the non-Brahmins in the legislature. While this was the declared objective, the organization was indeed more concerned with stemming the tide of the Justice Party’s (that is, the political formation of the non-Brahmins) influence among the masses. Periyar became one of its vice presidents, played an active role and worked with his characteristic zeal, commitment and transparency. However, the ambiguous support of the dominant Brahminical group within the Congress, lack of initiative on the part of the largely well-to-do members and scarcity of resources lead to the eventual demise of the organization. The Meston Award in 1920, of granting the non-Brahmins a share in the membership of the legislature, literally sealed the fate of the organization (Viswanathan 1983).

What is of interest to us, however, is that the very first step of Periyar in politics was to do with the protection and promotion of the interests of the non-Brahmins as a distinct and contrastive social as well as ideological category. Now, from here on, Periyar’s life’s task was to work for the comprehensive, ideological and actual liberation of the non-Brahminical masses understood inclusively and not necessarily in an ascriptive sense. But there was this interlude in his life as a Congressman, or better, a Gandhian. Persuaded by C. Rajagopalachari (Rajaji), his life-long friend, but attracted more by Mr Gandhi’s idealism and his strategies of deconstruction

(non-cooperation) as well as reconstruction (Hindu–Muslim unity—interpreted as unity of all religious communities, eradication of untouchability—interpreted as abolition of caste in all its manifestations, prohibition—interpreted in the widest sense as social reform and khadi—interpreted once again in the widest sense of economic reconstruction), Periyar joined the Tamil Nadu Congress and very soon rose to become its secretary and president consecutively because of his enthusiastic commitment, organizational skills and readiness to undergo any amount of personal hardship and loss for the cause. But, working as a dedicated insider, he came to realize early enough that the Congress, particularly in Tamil Nadu had very little to do with Mr Gandhi or his idealism, the organization functioned mostly to promote the interests of the Brahmins, who dominated it from top to bottom; it stood against literally all social reforms being discussed and demanded then, and its current goal was to achieve power by destroying the Justice Party and what it stood for, that is some sort of category-wise rights but specially separate rights for the non-Brahmins; and that to these ends, Mr Gandhi was being made use of in every possible way. But very soon however, he was to realize, to his utter dismay, that Mr Gandhi himself was not all that passive, but an active believer, propagator and promoter of *Varnavyavastha* that is, opposition to all progressive-egalitarian changes in social relations the masses were clamoring for then, and also upholding the Brahminical pre-eminence in public life. Mr Gandhi's unambiguous articulation and detailed elaboration of his commitment to what he believed was the *status quo ante* in the subcontinent, explained for Periyar, the former's enormous popularity with the Brahmins, that all Mr Gandhi's programs whether of deconstruction or reconstruction had to be understood within his quasi-philosophical framework of people being born of different tendencies, these tendencies being passed on through heredity and that (Hindu) dharma demanded the upholding of these ascriptively differentiated and hereditarily determined group differences. With his disillusionment with Mr Gandhi, everything fell into place for Periyar and he achieved a certain amount of clarity in understanding the social politics of the time. He could not continue any more either as a Congressman or Gandhiite, but was increasingly constrained to work against them. He first quit the Congress and then gave up on Mr Gandhi. In 1927, he launched the Self-Respect Movement and indefatigably worked for another nearly half a century for the reconstruction of the Dravidian/Tamil society along humane, rationalist and democratic lines.

The points to be highlighted for our discussion here is that Periyar did not join the Congress in order to immerse himself mindlessly in its declared political agenda of ejecting the British. This perhaps was the idea of those who helped in his induction into the organization. On the other hand, when he joined the Congress in 1919, he already had a definite vision of and an agenda for the larger society and social relations. Early on in his life he had developed a critical-moral sense of society: Society and social relations were not what they ought to be; they require serious and systematic intervention in order to reshape them towards what he considered right, rational, moral and just. The direction of social change he envisaged and sought to engage in was broadly along democratization, rationalization and thus humanization of economy, society and culture. While the seeming euphoria generated among the masses for the political agenda of the Congress gave him and many others the illusion of socio-political radicality, Periyar was soon to realize, that the Congress agenda was pure politics of substitution of the British with itself as the ruler and that any other engagement was only secondary and instrumental to this all-consuming purpose. In this context, Periyar's presence and function within the Congress could not be anything other than critique and struggle. As the overwhelming, elitist, exclusivist and insolent presence of the Brahminical everywhere, but mostly in the emerging realms of higher education and administration and the corresponding marginalization and degradation of the masses were the immediate and striking phenomena of

the day, the same was also for Periyar, the obvious starting point of all socio-political engagement. The dawn of the new era—modernity—for him was characterized by socio-economic as well as politico-cultural egalitarianism; and the function of politics, as he understood, was to bring this about.

In the concrete scenario, therefore, Periyar's struggle was to inscribe this rationalist-democratic agenda within the political organization itself. His grievance was double-edged: The Brahminical was unduly monopolizing everything and all other communities were being unjustly relegated and neglected. From the very beginning of his entry in the Congress he was forever on the lookout that this principle of all communities must develop and be given opportunities to participate in a democracy, that is “communal representation,” be accepted by the organization (Viswanathan 1983). He insistently intervened in all the conferences of the Congress both at the provincial and pan-Indian levels on behalf of inscribing some sort of community-justice within the organization and the larger society. But every time his efforts were frustrated at some level or the other by the Brahmins in collusion with some obliging non-Brahmins. The Kanchipuram Provincial Congress of 1925 finally came, to decide on the delegates and resolutions to be sent to the All-India Congress at Patna in view of the coming elections. The agenda there was to decide on the council entry. E.V. Ramasami's resolution for proportional representation for all communities was once again rejected on technical and procedural points, he walked out of the General Session and organized there and then a separate non-Brahmin meeting and proposed the following resolution for consideration: “to accept the principle that in all offices and representative institutions, Brahmins, Non-Brahmins, and the so-called Depressed Classes shall have representation with due regard to their population strength and communicate this resolution to the National Congress.” With great difficulty and some modification, the resolution was passed and sent to the General Session, where once again it was rejected. With this, Periyar left the Congress, and Mr Gandhi's explanations of his belief in and justifications of *Varnadharma* during his visit to Tamil Nadu in 1927 had settled the matter for him once and for all. Meantime, two important things had taken place—the issue of inter-dining of Brahmins and non-Brahmins at the Congress supported Gurukulam and the Vaikkom agitation for the use of public streets by the so-called untouchable classes. While for most others, these two incidents were separate and had nothing to do with the demand of “communal representation,” they were indeed integral in Periyar's vision of things. The former was but the socio-religious expression of the political denial of the latter. The attitudes and responses of the Brahmins and Mr Gandhi to the former, only helped to confirm their resistance to the latter. The pieces of the puzzle all fell into place, exposing the Brahminical vested interests against all changes which might require them to shed or share some power with the others.

Freed of all ambiguities, prevarications and defensiveness, now Periyar, out of the Congress and the near hypnotizing effect of Mr Gandhi, was to sit back and think things through. He was to set new priorities and lines of action for himself according to his own analysis of the contemporary society and its deficiencies. Periyar came up with the notion of self-respect—a rubric and an umbrella concept in and through which his specifically political struggle for “communal representation,” was launched. It was a struggle that yielded unusually abundant results, and which made him unique among the 20th century ideolog-activists of the subcontinent. Within a short period of two years he announced the Provincial Self-Respect Conference at Chengelpet. The Conference, held in early 1929, was indeed a high watermark in the spread and popularity of the new concept and practice of self-respect; it laid down in clear terms all the main outlines of the future struggle. At the top of the 20 or so resolutions stood the rejection of the Nehru Committee Plan and the unambiguous affirmation of category-wise rights as one of the fundamental principles of the new movement. The interpretative exposition below

of Periyar's ideology and practice of category-wise rights will first delineate their important aspects, compare them with those of the other contestants in the field, contextualize them in the overall social philosophy of Periyar and suggest that the ideolog's agenda of category-wise rights in the public-political sphere was in fact not the most important aspect of his vision of the society he wanted to construct.<sup>12</sup>

## Perspectives

A few preliminary points are to be noted concerning Periyar's struggle for what he termed as Category-wise Rights: One is the fact that his struggle for the category-wise rights was not separated from, but integral to his overall vision of the future society. If self-respect was the key word to describe his life-struggle, this movement for category-wise rights is but its political aspect; denial of category-wise rights in the corollary, was but the political expression of the social degradation, that is denial of self-respect, that the Brahminical view and way of life had pushed the masses of people into; accordingly, the struggle against this, was to build up from deep within the present state of social degradation, a comprehensive struggle for changing society, culture and economy, and sustained by a host of other radical demands. Secondly, Periyar's struggle for category-wise rights was seriously and systematically implicated with the main issues and controversies of the day; and it was not an isolated demand that could non-problematically be dovetailed within the elite agenda. Category-wise rights for him had everything to do with the deconstruction of the on-going claim and clamor of nationalism of the dominant castes; it was also wedged right into the crux of what was being offered as anti-colonialism; once again category-wise rights had everything to do with the solving of the prevailing and persisting "communal problem" of the day, that is the proliferation of controversies, animosities and conflicts among the fragmented castes and communities of the subcontinent; finally, the struggle for category-wise rights was in the very vortex of the struggle to construct not only the new nation but also the actualization of democracy and social justice in the concrete circumstances of the day. Thirdly, Periyar's position on this issue was from the platform of principle rather than sectarian interests. When he entered the scenario, there were many caste, community-based contestants demanding separate shares of rights with different rationale as we have delineated above. Practically, all of them had used or benefited from Periyar's ideological efflorescence. Periyar himself had made use of their platforms in order to articulate his view. Therefore, there indeed was a convergence to an extent, between him and the groups—non-Brahmins, Depressed Classes and minorities—demanding separate rights. But, his ideology of category-wise rights, while subsumed in these demands, could not be identified with any of them. His was a headlong ideological and principled confrontation with the dominant groups, identified as the Brahminical, which were stubbornly resisting all forms of separate rights. On the other hand, his stance could also be sufficiently differentiated from the various sectional demands including that of the non-Brahmins. It was Periyar's principled stance on the question that gave him a distinct advantage and enabled him to come out with insights not available to those who were only arguing for their own individual communities or separate categories. And finally, the mode of Periyar's elaboration of his views on category-wise rights was through controversial negotiation with his opponent, in other words, systematic deconstruction. He hunted out the opponent, met him point-wise in all his propositions, de-bunked his camouflages systematically and set out his counterviews of the problem. It was one unceasing battle of ideological hermeneutics. As he battled with his opponent, confronting and exposing him in the ideological realms, he was through the same processes opening out spaces for the hitherto relegated groups who were then able to advance and consolidate their positions in public-

political life. These few points need to be remembered while reading Periyar's ideological and concrete maneuvers.

### **The what, for whom, until when and the how of category-wise rights**

Periyar used several terms to describe what he was arguing for, that is, democratic distribution of rights and resources among the fragmented groups of the country always favoring the weaker, the more relegated and the more marginalized.<sup>13</sup> The basic term in his vocabulary is *vahuppu*, which would lend itself to be translated as kind, class, community and category; this is not a fixed or closed entity, nor does it refer only to the castes and religious minorities; as and when a segment of a population conceptualizes and mobilizes itself as a unity and demands recognition and consideration, whatever be its basic unit, gets termed as a *vahuppu*. If the word "class" would be a general translation, the word "community" comes from the minority discourse for separate rights as from "religious community." And the tendency has been to collapse all demand for separate rights into the community mode and translate Periyar's concept as community-wise rights. However, from the specific point of view of Periyar's discourse, though the concern was for the concrete castes and communities, the demand was based on "categories" usually consisting of a collection of communities/castes, and also interest-groups such as industry, academia, etc., presumed to be equal within, among the constituents. Hence, it is this term that has been the preferred one here, but without avoiding the term "community" whenever the occasion demands. Of this, he spoke of category-wise representation (*vahuppuvare Prathinithithuvam*) when the issue was that of elected or selected positions in the political sphere; he also referred to "category-wise argument" (*vahuppu vadham*, often wrongly translated as or mixed up with communalism) to contrast with the dominant discourse of a homogenized nationalist argument; the most common and inclusive usage was category-wise rights (*vahuppu urimai*). The term "rights" was used generally to refer to the group's entitlements in the spheres of education, employment and other valued goods under the control of the state. More often than not, he used the term "representation" where the term "rights" would have been more appropriate. The former term was more in vogue then, but the latter term would better indicate the radical and comprehensive nature of his concept. What is important however is, that through all these, he was arguing for one and the same thing, that is democratic/equal/just distribution of public goods, material and non-material as an ever-inclusive process in a way that takes into consideration the concrete circumstances of the subcontinental reality. However, it is to be noted that Periyar's discourse on the issue was constrained by not only the oppositional and parallel discourses but also the historically evolved practices; his was also an attempt to overcome these constraints in order to approximate something different, beyond and more radical. Taking all these into consideration, it would be appropriate to use the phrase "category-wise rights" in order to inclusively refer to what Periyar was arguing for.

What did Periyar mean by category-wise rights? He did give an inkling of his mind when he drafted the resolution to be forwarded to and passed by the Tamil Nadu Provincial Congress, Kanchipuram, in 1925. This was referred to above. Again, writing in *Kudi Arasu*, at the same time he defined the concept thus: "The meaning of category-wise representation is that the general rights of a nation's administration and the entire citizenship rights of that country should be accessed by all *groups* (emphasis added) equally without discrimination" (*Kudi Arasu*, November 22, 1925). Secondly, who are these groups, so entitled for rights? Certain social categories had emerged at the time of Periyar demanding separate rights—Depressed Classes, minorities, non-Brahmins, etc. But he was averse to bestowing any special legitimacy and freezing the contemporary formation of categories. His "all groups" meant literally all groups, covering the entire

population, whether they were big or small, backward or forward, politically important or not, presently organized or not, and projected as a single group or a collection of groups. As and when new categories emerged and claimed separate rights, they were also to be considered if the principle was to be taken seriously. His criterion was simple: If any group organizing itself comes up to the public sphere and claims that it was left behind or still worse dominated, it does not trust the other groups and that it should be represented by itself and not by the others, such a group is certainly fit to be considered for separate rights; in this way, when applying the principle of category-wise rights, one should be ready to face proliferation of such demands for separate rights (*Kudi Arasu*, November 22, 1925; October 11, 1931; November 8, 1931). As pointed out above, this formation of categories, for Periyar was not exhausted within the traditional castes and religious communities: He advocated group-rights for laborers, industry and also for women (*Kudi Arasu*, March 29, 1947). Given the situation that social divisiveness was important for the Brahminically dominant and that such divisiveness was there to stay and to be promoted, then there was no flinching away for Periyar from the possible proliferation of groups in public-political life and such a phenomenon had to be faced and the new groups are to be provided for (*Kudi Arasu*, June 6, 1926). Thirdly, why were these category-wise rights necessary? That is because,

we are the majority only in numbers; we are pushed far behind and remain as backward classes in education, social status and wealth conditions; as an example, lowly employments, wage and physical labour and other engagements involving much hardships are only our lot; in order to move ourselves out of this degraded conditions and backwardness, we certainly require some protections. (*Kudi Arasu*, September 22, 1940)

Further, if Swaraj is attained, it should be common to all; therefore, arrangements must be made that one class could trust another; such protection should be in place that one class does not arrogate to itself the entitlement of another; this category-wise scheme is such a protective measure (*Kudi Arasu*, November 29, 1925). Fourthly, is this a permanent arrangement? No! It will be in operation only as long as inequality among the social groups exists in society and it would be dismantled when all groups will have achieved equality, or still better, when the system of caste itself is destroyed. Periyar found the social arrangements in our country peculiar, and he also found the elite class in this country was not willing to give up divisiveness at the social level. Therefore, this category-wise scheme was devised to be deployed under such unusual conditions (*Kudi Arasu*, February 14, 1926). Fifthly, under the concrete circumstances, “equally without discrimination” or equality could only be interpreted as proportionate, that is proportionate to the population of the groups concerned. Having accepted the social groups as the basic unit of calculation, one cannot avoid this proportion according to population; allotments of rights and resources, could not depend on the pressure exerted by the groups themselves or the whims of the dominant; in order to be fair to all and also to appear to be fair it was necessary to follow this crude and certainly insufficient method. Periyar also insisted on this mechanical device for another reason: the dominant groups, despite their minuscule population were grabbing most of the rights and resources and this method of population proportion would cut into their monopoly and thus release the surplus rights and resources for the appropriation by people down the social ladder whose population proportion was indeed very high (*Kudi Arasu*, May 22, 1948); but it would be in consonance with the spirit of Periyar to argue that population proportion could and even should be relaxed when it came to the question of allotting more spaces for the most relegated and Depressed Classes. Finally, the scheme also included a separate electorate, that is when the question of electing representatives arises, each group/community/category would

elect their own representatives; this, in the understanding of Periyar, would make the representatives autonomous of the dominant groups in society and more responsible towards their own communities (*Kudi Arasu*, August 25, 1940).

### **Proportional representation for the Brahmins**

Periyar's scheme of category-wise rights did not leave out the Brahminical castes; indeed, it could even be said that it was these communities who formed its special target. In his scheme of things, most of the problem could even be solved, once the Brahminical castes were given rights and representations proportional to their population. The Brahminical of Tamil Nadu, though constituting a mere 3 percent of the population was indeed enjoying near absolute and monopoly dominance in the typically modern spheres of education, employment and political representation (*Kudi Arasu*, March 30, 1946; August 25, 1940). Not only this, they occupied most of the colonial jobs under the pretext of merit and efficiency, in the realm of politics they also claimed to represent the entire population. And this merely meant that the other groups were not only not eligible to take on the bureaucratic jobs, but they need not worry about their own political representation as this job also would be done better by the same Brahminical. Added to this, was the insistent Brahminical-nationalist rhetoric of the need for people keeping to their ascriptive places ordained by nature!

It was this unjust, immoral and thoroughly illegitimate stance of the Brahminical that shocked Periyar beyond all description and evoked in him a fury that was trajectory towards the debunking and also dissolution of the Brahminical monopoly aggrandizement. Time and again he pointed out that the rise to monopoly dominance of the Brahminical in modern public life had nothing to do with their much-vaunted merit or efficiency. It had but everything to do first with their religio-cultural dominance based on the ignorance and stupidity of the illiterate masses of people, and second, on their early association and curry favoring with the colonizers (*Kudi Arasu*, March 30, 1946; March 20, 1948; May 15, 1948). The others were only deprived through the atrocities and trickery of these groups. Their claim to represent the others could only be likened to tigers claiming to speak for the welfare of the sheep and goats! The monopoly dominance and the corresponding rhetoric of the Brahminical in public life being thus built on fraud, cunning and ruthlessness had not only engendered pervasive exploitation of the masses and become the cause of much social conflict and misery, but also a perennial obstacle to the actualization of genuine nation and democracy. Periyar's solution to all these was the extension of his general principle of category-wise rights to the Brahmins also. Through such an extension, the Brahminical would be told that it was entitled, according to its population proportion only some three or so percent of rights and resources and the rest would democratically and proportionately be distributed among the others. In this way, their aggrandizement into the democratic entitlements of the others could be stopped. Category-wise rights when applied to the dominant Brahminical become a device of containment. Further, Periyar found that in the lowly jobs of the government a preponderance of the so-called lowly castes and near-total absence of the Brahminical in them. In other words, the job scenario merely reproduced the social scenario and there was no perceptible change in the consciously and politically constructed latter sphere. Treating this as a problem, Periyar suggested that the Brahminical be compelled to fulfil its proportional representation in the lowly jobs and that it be not given the higher ones, unless this condition was fulfilled (*Kudi Arasu*, May 22, 1948). The underlying concern obviously was that the consciously and politically constructed public life should not merely reproduce the pattern and structure of the traditional society but work as an agent of leveling and equalizing, so that the emergent new, be different from the persisting old.

## **Nationalism, unity and category-wise rights**

Periyar's conception and articulation of this scheme of category-wise rights directly and headlong addressed the dominant Brahminical-turning nationalist's insistent and contradictory refusal to countenance any form of group-based rights for the emerging India; and this was done curiously in the name of nationalism. Claiming to be the sole guardian of all nationalist interests, the elite argued that group-based or differential rights were an obstacle to the national unity which was of supreme importance for the nation-in-the-making; people divided into groups with rights of their own or differential rights would be concerned only with interests of their own and the most-needed commitment for the larger entity called the nation would not be forthcoming. The Brahminical elite was supposedly engaged in the supreme business of resisting colonialism; and for this purpose, it was mobilizing masses under its own leadership into a unity. In other words, the elite saw itself as leading the quasi-sacred task of building the nation—national unity—in the course of the very process of anti-colonialism. The call therefore was that the scattered peoples of the subcontinent, should sink their internal differences, come together as Indians united in suffering under foreign dominance, forge themselves into a political unity, fall behind the Brahminical leadership and achieve freedom. In this context, raising issues of internal differences and much worse, demanding separate rights, are but throwing up obstacles in the way of national unity and progress to freedom. Thus, those who were engaged in such activities were dubbed as anti-nationalists, communalists and indeed, stooges of colonialism! This was the argument of the leading elite.

Periyar was one of the very few ideologs who confronted this argument directly and took it by the horns. And in the process he also developed some remarkable theoretical insights on this question of nation and nationalism. Nationalism indeed was the agenda and bringing about national unity admittedly was the immediate task. But how should one go about this and bring about the desired unity under the concrete and given circumstances of the subcontinent? And what was this nationalism anyway?

Periyar was quick to point out the group-based and non-individuated nature of Indian society: Society here was not only constituted of disaggregate castes and religious communities but they were all also subsumed under the Brahminical philosophy of hierarchical ranking indicative of graded rights and liabilities in public life. This had been the situation of the subcontinent for centuries despite some unsuccessful efforts to change. Continued fragmentation and hierarchization both have engendered lack of trust, mutual animosity and at times even open hostility among the various groups. If such a collection of disparate groups is to be turned into a unified polity of the modern times, that is a nation or democracy, then, it stands to reason that these persisting social units be taken seriously and they would have to be carried over and represented in the form of equal and non-discriminate, yet distinct allotments of caste and community rights, if only endemic controversies and conflicts are to be avoided. The absence of separate rights in the context of such social divisiveness, fast turning political, made representation of one unit by the other not only impossible but suppressive and exploitative, rights and resources tend to be monopolized by the stronger groups and leave the other groups deprived and disgruntled. This much had been also pointed out by many others. However, what was peculiar to Periyar was that he also added the observation that not only was society here divided into castes and communities, but the Brahminical elite systematically and publicly insisted anachronistically, that such divisiveness should be perpetuated and did all in its power to promote it; and that this was the premise as well as the promise on which all the elite politics was conducted. In Periyar's discourse, this was indeed tantamount to pinching the baby and rocking the cradle at the same

time, which of course achieved no purpose. And further, such denial has actually resulted in the monopoly dominance of the Brahminical in public life and the corresponding marginalization or “backwardization” of all the others!

Despite all their clamor of representativeness, the Brahminical-turned-nationalists, were recognized by the people and also the government as merely one sectarian interest-group among several competing ones. In which case, Periyar pointed out that nationalism does not mean the enabling and ennobling of one particular group over all the others. On the other hand, nationalism means the removal of all high and low distinctions, equalizing of all groups through equal distribution of the available rights and resources. It is the raising-up of all the groups however small and weak they may be. Against this, the nationalism of the dominant Brahminical, which insisted on non-recognition of the differentiation and discrimination among the existing groups and through this device achieved monopoly dominance through mere fraud on the masses. In order to move towards genuine nationalism, Periyar suggested that there was no way other than category-wise rights under the contemporary conditions.

Nationalism once again, it was agreed upon by all sides to the controversy is about production and projection of harmony and unity among all the peoples. How could one bring about such harmony and unity among people divided in terms of caste and religion? The elite way was to preach to the people to forget their differences, because they were all Indians anyway, fall behind the Brahminical leadership and thus strengthen the anti-colonial nationalism. The warring groups, on the other hand, were aware that the coming into being of the nation and modern state is about the formation of a new kind of society, a society in which people are all homogenized and given equal rights and liabilities as citizens. There were but two options in front of such a people: either determinedly and systematically initiate the process of abolition of all differentiations, particularly of a discriminatory nature or distribute the rights and resources proportionately among the existing as well as future groups. The people at large clearly saw that the Brahminical “governing class” was not at all ready to do away with the traditionally and religiously upheld discriminatory differences, but on the other hand was doing all it could to perpetuate them. In this context, the groups had no alternative but to struggle for proportionate and separate rights for the politically mobilized formations and communities. This was the logic of Periyar’s socio-political struggle expressed in various ways and at different contexts.

With remarkable insight, he laid out the nature of unity and harmony to be struggled after, in the context of nationalism as different from other contexts. While the Brahminical elite was calling for unity on the basis of “commonality” of the ambiguous fact that all people were Indians in contrast to the British and that they should forget or put aside the differences among themselves, Periyar was insisting on “unity” based on egalitarian removal of all discriminations and the emergence of a contractual-political consciousness and understanding. In this ideological-hermeneutic battle around the issue of production of national unity, it is not difficult to note the incipient formulations of the two classical kinds of nationalisms, that is, cultural and political. Here are some of his viewpoints that were published in the Tamil language daily newspaper *Kudi Arasu*.

Every one of us claim to struggle for the attainment of Swaraj. And for that purpose, we also endure any amount of sufferings. If we attain Swaraj, shouldn't that be of the common people? If we view the contemporary situation of the country, fear has spread among the people that the Swaraj would be that of the Brahmins only.

(*Kudi Arasu*, December 6, 1925)

Does the nation depend on the welfare of all its communities or the welfare of only one community? Those who search for genuine national welfare would only go after the welfare of the depressed and backward classes; they would only call this as national welfare. Nation is meant for all class and not only for the weighty ones.

(*Kudi Arasu, February 14, 1926*)

Every man should first of all be concerned with his own class. When all classes thus get rectified and reformed, the nation which constitutes all classes will automatically be rectified and reformed. On the other hand, if the country remaining divided into many classes and each class keeps trying to deceive the other, how could they all be united? How could the nation be freed? We want the readers to pay attention here. If one irrigates a field, only when the water reaches all parts, good harvest would result. On the other hand, if the water does not reach all parts, there are ups and downs in the field, many parts would be dried up and other parts even if some of them might yield good harvest, several others might become rotten on account of excess of water. Therefore, the rights we derive from the Government, the water, should be made to flow to all the classes equally, the garden. This is of foremost importance.

(*Kudi Arasu, June 6, 1926*)

When the entire India is an exhibition of communities, the Legislative Assemblies set for such a country could only be along the same lines! Instead, if only one community, represents all other communities, what is the meaning of saying that India should be ruled by the Indians themselves for their own well-being and that India should be given total freedom. If it is said that we ought not to bother about community-good and or caste, why are we making efforts to transform the employment scenario from being monopolistically European into monopolistically Indian? Is it that the Brahmins could enjoy them all after driving out the Europeans? Or, if it is said, it is for the enjoyment of the Indians, who indeed are these Indians? India is constituted of several communities and religions. Then, it could only be said that “ruling by Indians” or “Indian experience” means the participation of all these communities and religions in the administration.

(*Kudi Arasu, June 20, 1926*)

At the very mention of category-wise representation the Brahmins, in chorus clamour, “Nation is lost,” “Unity is destroyed” and “Category-wise argument is the worst evil.” They not only raise such a hue and cry in unison, but they also buy up our people and make them cry so. This, we all know. The reason why the Brahmins are opposed to this category-wise representation, has been revealed unconsciously by Mr. C Rajagopalachari in an article titled, “Illusory Deer Hunt” and published in *Navasakti*. That is, he has said in that essay, “category-wise representation means telling the Brahmins, that their service to the nation is no longer required and thus pushing them aside. A caste, which has been serving the nation for several thousand years, cannot be pushed aside so easily, through this category-wise representation. The nation requires people with intelligence, training and merit.” Even if we do not pay attention to the other aspects in this, when he himself has said that category-wise representation is ruinous only to the Brahmins, do we need any further reason why the other Brahmins also object to this?

(*Kudi Arasu, December 26, 1926*)

Finally, more than that all community-differentiations disappearing, all people must be united, it is our important policy that all people should attain equal rights. Because, once all people achieve equal rights, unity will come about automatically. Where there is no equal rights, there could not be genuine unity. Therefore, even if much disturbances and bloodshed are caused for the sake of attaining equal rights, no one needs to bother about that. For, unity without freedom and equality is one thing. And it is altogether another thing to have unity based on them. Therefore, even if much unity is to be sacrificed for the sake of attaining equality and freedom, once these are achieved, unity will emerge automatically.

(*Kudi Arasu, November 4, 1928*)

If our country of India is to attain freedom and self-respect, first of all, there should develop unity and mutual trust among the Indian people; But India is divided into so many religions, nationalities and castes and class divisions have become so numerous preventing the development of such unity and mutual trust. This is known to one and all. In order to abolish these differentiations, many great men have been struggling for a long time both in the name of society and politics. But all their efforts have been in vain for, day by day new religions, castes and classes are emerging. We are unable to say that these differentiations are abating or showing any sign of such abating. It is our opinion that no one can deny these things. Further, ever since the Indians started demanding political freedom from the Government and the Government started so giving in little by little, heavy-salaried jobs and high powered positions came about, and these were all appropriated through trickery and cunning by the powerful people alone. With this, the hope of developing unity and mutual trust easily among the people receded. Having realized this, those volunteers and great men with true devotion to the country, considering the importance of unity and mutual trust for the country's progress, have been struggling in the social and superstitious spheres to remove differentiations in beliefs and in political spheres to create as far as possible equal opportunities and equal rights for all so that unity could develop among all classes. But, many people, whether knowingly or unknowingly or on account of their selfishness, or as mercenaries of the enemies, in so many ways have been opposing these efforts. This also cannot be denied. But, whatever be the nature of such opposition, they could not have their intended effect and it could be said that the efforts of those volunteers and great men, going beyond all these obstacles are indeed yielding good results.

(*Kudi Arasu, August 4, 1929*)

Therefore, any small group which declares no confidence in other castes and communities should be given representation and such arrangements should be made that the group concerned could choose its own representatives with full rights. The regime of Swaraj itself should only be devised accordingly. Otherwise, the business of ruling should be handed over to a common group, that is a group outside or above the discipline and control of the Indian caste system. We are constrained to say this. On the other hand, if someone says, "I will not give up my high caste status and experience, but I will also be the patron-representative of those whom I oppress and torture as 'low caste,'" it could only be pure knavery.

(*Kudi Arasu, October 11, 1931*)

Families, refusing to allot the due shares of its members are mostly ruined. Similarly, any nation, refusing to give the due share of any religion or caste and cheat, will certainly come to ruin. No doubt, even if so ruined some irresponsible mercenaries could make their livelihood in it. But we are duty-bound to explain to the truthful and responsible people that the nation will indeed be ruined.

(*Kudi Arasu, November 8, 1931*)

A nation is common to all living beings. National governance is also common to all. No fool can deny that every man has the right to express one's desire and participate in governance. When the dishonest and treacherous people were influential, the foolish and immoral kings fell into their trap and thus caused the emergence of caste-religion arrogances, through oppressions and atrocities. Once caste-religion emerged, they came to control and rule over one another. Once caste-religion emerged, people of one caste and religion came to lead indolent life sponging on the labour of others. Does this mean that all periods and regimes should be in favour of those few treacherous people? And if some people with no other means of livelihood became the mercenaries of those base beings, should all the people also accordingly be so debased? This is what we demand to know.

(*Kudi Arasu, September 13, 1936*)

A country's public life and unity depend upon the satisfaction and progress of every class of people of that country; It does not depend, on the other hand, in the progress and enjoyment of one or two communities in all spheres and all the others being considered as low class and pushed down in every way and compelled to remain and lead the life of slaves.

(*Kudi Arasu, August 25, 1940*)

It is the opinion of the intelligent that category-wise representation has this idea of delivering community-wise justice and it is not against nationalism, or opposed to independence or damaging freedom. As this Indian sub-continent is a region, constituted of many castes, religions and communities, the Indian political principle also is based on caste, religion and community.

(*Kudi Arasu, November 30, 1946*)

In this country, where there are multiple religions and multiple castes, should the administration be such as to all people could achieve equal rights? Or is it to allow those caste men who are merely of three percent only to enjoy and exploit everything and only the leftover be distributed among those who are the 97 per cent: and is this to be called, I demand to know Swaraj?

(*Kudi Arasu, May 22, 1948*)

### **Communalism and community-wise arguments**

It is an elementary insight of modern Indian history that nationalism here cannot be understood except in the context of what has come to be known as "communalism" and vice versa. Was nationalism indeed nationalism and similarly was communalism really communalism were questions debated incessantly during the colonial period? And the dominant discourse of the elite was that any group-based concern was communalism, leading to com-

munal hatred, conflicts and the prevention of unity; and again any concern expressed in the name of the total society, irrespective of its context or concrete consequence was hailed as nationalism and therefore every other concern should give way to it. Within this discourse, demand for community-based rights could easily be branded and delegitimized as communalism. Accordingly, the pervasive and contesting demands for separate rights were seen as the root cause of the prevailing controversies and conflicts. Further, the Brahminical elite accused the colonial government of abetting these demands in order to obstruct its own rising nationalism.

Periyar refused to concede any of these propositions and thus systematically deprived the elite of its ideological hegemony in the matter. First of all, by repeatedly characterizing the Indian National Congress, as Brahminical, and exposing its practices as sectarian, though projected as universal, he deconstructed it merely as communal–sectarian in the true sense. Secondly, he challenged whether there was anything apart or abstracted from the different interests of all those participating castes and communities that could be considered as national at all. The sum of all the interests of the various participating castes and communities is what could truly be termed as national and not anything away from or above all these. The strength of the nation is not more than its weakest link in the chain. That is only when all communities without exception become strong, the nation also could be called strong and not otherwise. In a fragmented but hierarchically structured society, political consciousness and mobilization would necessarily be category or community-based, until all the communities achieve participatory and also appropriatory parity.<sup>14</sup> Only after this, and on the basis of this nationalism, could concern for the totality emerge. And only such an emergence could be genuine.

The current controversies and conflicts among the castes and communities are merely trajectoryed to achieve this participatory and appropriatory parity. In other words, the ongoing fights are simply because category-wise rights are not being granted and not because they are granted. Granting category-wise rights is the sole method of bringing about harmony and unity among the currently warring communities. Harmony in a caste-community-based society could only be brought about by recognizing all communities and social formations as equal and apportioning the available rights and resources among them proportionately without any discrimination. This process must go on as long as there enclosed and differentially placed communities exist and are recognized by religion and culture.

Finally, Periyar also refuted the argument that the government was favoring those who demanded category-wise rights, those who demanded were the darlings of the government and that that was aimed at the rising dominance of the Brahminical nationalism. Periyar asserted that the colonizers did not in practice support the principle of category-wise rights, though they did play with it in relation to some groups. In fact, systematic support to category-wise rights could not, in Periyar's view, be within the colonial logic. Their continuance here depended on the divisions and disunity among the groups. They knew well that the day when the different communities united, that very day, the death knell to colonialism would inevitably sound. They needed to divide and rule their subjects. Ironically, this too was the interest of the rising nationalists! The day when all the marginalized and backwardized communities unite on the agreed principle of category-wise rights, the monopoly dominance of the Brahminical elite also would have to go. Not granting proportionate rights to the different communities was certainly in the continued interest of the Brahmins as well as the British. Coincidence between the Brahminical and the British concerns, and collusion between them on all important issues as against the interests and concerns of the masses is a persisting subtheme running through all of Periyar's writing, and this has been discovered only recently by modern Indian historiography. Some of his quotations are given here:

If such conflicts are not to erupt in our country, as Dr Kitchelew has mentioned in the all India Muslim Conference, we may have to wholeheartedly agree and support the fact that without unity there is no Swaraj and that without category-wise rights there is no other way of achieving unity.

(*Kudi Arasu, July 19, 1925*)

No one would object aunty being called uncle if she develops moustache! But having clearly understood that today the obstacle to the national progress is disunity and that this disunity is because of one community degrading, deceiving and ruining the other and thereby seeking to progress, is it proper to keep speaking of the law of Dharma Sastras? Haven't the Indian Christians, Mohamadans, Europeans and Anglo-Indians been given category-wise representations in some departments? Similarly, if the Brahmins and Non-Brahmins are also given category-wise representations, what harm will it bring to the national progress? Does the unity, said to exist among the Hindus, Mohamadans, Christians, also to be found between communities calling themselves Brahmins and Non-Brahmins? As long as there exist the ideas that within the one and the same religion, some are higher by birth, and how-much-so-ever they are base and mean, they are entitled to certain privileges and honour because of birth; and others who are not Brahmins, however great they may be, are indeed low people, if one touches, approaches or even sees them, and if they are allowed to walk in the streets, it would be sin; and if such ideas and principles are kept as the foundation of one's religion, how could trust and love develop between the two communities? May be one day the Mohamadans, Non-Brahmin Hindus, Indian Christians, Europeans and Anglo-Indians all may come together. But, is there any scope for the Brahmin and Non-Brahmin Hindus to coming together?

(*Kudi Arasu, August 16, 1925*)

For, this scheme of category-wise representation, we should realize that it is not only the Brahmins who are opposed to it, but the foreign Government also. Because, the more we quarrel amongst ourselves and are disunited, the longer and longer would the time-limit of the foreign rule be extending. On the other hand, if they grant us category-wise rights and all employments are distributed among all groups, each according to one's proportionate share, giving up quarrels and exploitations among us, we would all get united. And this is dangerous to the foreign rule. Therefore, this principle is forever opposed to the foreign government.

(*Kudi Arasu, April 18, 1926*)

Every community could only look after oneself first and then only think of the nation. Nothing could be more foolish than to condemn their own wives and children to hunger and take to propitiating the Brahmins. Our country is constituted of many communities. If every community looks after its own welfare, then all communities would achieve well-being. It would then mean that the country itself has achieved well-being.

(*Kudi Arasu, June 20, 1926*)

In today's politics, that is nationalism, if one wants to be known as a great political sage and enthusiastic nationalist, however so much knavish, selfish and opportunist he be, it

is enough if he says one thing, that is, there should be no community-wise argument. If he does this, he would get instantly all the publicity he wants, the titles of patriot and devotee of the nation and also labels of political sage and committed nationalist. Our Brahmins would drag such a person from place to place, get people read congratulatory addresses for him, respect him with garlands, and singing his praises, send him back. On the other hand, however much a man be honest, sincere, genuinely engaged in the struggles for the people and country, does many sacrifices and suffers losses, if he says, "Shouldn't community-wise rights, that is, the same rights as the others enjoy, be given to those, who in the name of their communities, have been separated from others and oppressed, both as per the law and also custom and tradition?" our "nationalists" would instantly be provoked to anger. Such a one would be branded as communalist and traitor to the nation and insulted as one without nationalist wisdom and a stumbling block to the national freedom, harmony and Swaraj.

Let it go. But, if one says, that all religions should come together, all communities should come together, there should not be any differentiation or high-low discrimination among the people on account of caste or religion, either in social life or law, they would retort, "Are *Thulukkan* and *Malukkan* one, Parppan and Paraiyan one? What! You seem to be a traitor to religion and a man promoting community-hatred?" And again, if one replies, "In that case, shouldn't they be given separate rights?" then they would start abusing him saying, "This is treachery to the nation and betrayal of nationalism."

(*Kudi Arasu, August 23, 1931*)

O! Community-wise Argument! What indeed is the gravity of your degradation? One shudders even to think! From this, it is clear that the 'nationalist' argument is comforted, elevated and celebrated and the 'community' argument is degraded, tortured and betrayed. Never mind, we are still a community ideologue. If you ask me, "For how long?", it is as long as there exists in India, class differentiation among people under any pretext—country, religion, colour, caste, class, occupation, gender, either in law or in social custom and attitudes. As long as such discrimination exists, I boldly, clearly and firmly assert that we will remain a community ideologue.

(*Kudi Arasu, August 23, 1931*)

It has been the policy of the Indian National Congress and also considered extremely nationalist that representation should not be in accordance with the caste-religion differentiations which are prevalent in the country today. Besides, only those who support such a policy could be nationalists. As for as we are concerned, merely because we assert that people should be given representation as per their caste and religion, our name has not been registered in the list of the nationalists, but included in that of the communalists and traitors to the nation. However, our name alone has been registered also in the list of traitors to caste and religion that is, those who say that all such differentiations of caste, religion and class should be abolished. On the other hand, the names of all extreme nationalists are only included in the list of caste-religion protectors. From this, people with reason could understand who actually the caste-religion based communalists are. But, the ignorant people with no sense of their own, will not desist from criticizing us.

(*Kudi Arasu, October 11, 1931*)

By saying that category-wise argument is bad, they could only intimidate some cowards, nationalists without any other livelihood and job-hunters, but we demand to know, whether it is possible to abolish the suffering and loss on account of communal divisions and high-low discrimination? We do not care at all for the Tom dick and harry who have started to speak and write: "Those who speak of casteism, communalism and religionism and demand proportionate representation are ruining the cause of national independence." Among those who do so speak and write, we challenge, would even a half percent have given up their own religion, caste and community or sub-religion, sub-caste and sub-community? Therefore, it will not but become clear for the attentive, how much this nationalism and nationalist livelihood have turned the people dishonest and debased. When one has been separated and got for oneself a distinct religion, caste and community, what wrong and dishonesty could there be if one demands specific rights for his own caste, religion and community? Those worthies, who speak against caste, community and religion based rights argument, does even one amongst them, agree to abolish caste community and religion? Not only this, from the Parppanar to Paraiyar, Illusionism to Saivism, everyone speaks of protecting one's caste, community and religion. Is it possible to find a single one who speaks of burying deep, caste, community and religion? Protection of caste, community and religion on the one hand, and branding the demand for the same caste, community and religion based category-wise representation, as dishonesty and chauvinism on the other, isn't it a thousand-fold dishonest and two thousand-fold chauvinist, treacherous and perfidious? Isn't it a mentality of base-people that anything can be done for the sake of one's own life and livelihood, we demand to know.

(Kudi Arasu, November 8, 1931)

The reform and progress of the Indian peoples appear as communalism to its enemies. On the other hand it is accepted not only by the Indians but by the people of the world that it is the communities and religions which are the obstacle to India's reform and progress. It cannot be denied by any historian that ever since the dawn of history in India, the country has been harassed by communalisms and subjected to untold hardships through communal disturbances—loss of life and frequent political change. It could only be said that communalism has caused victory or defeat in the country, but was never absent ...

We are constrained to note that there is no evidence to say that India was free at anytime of this communalism. Even governance seems to have taken place on the basis of communities. As the people have been divided in the name of religion, caste and nationality, these divisions have become the basis for communalism, and therefore unless these divisions are changed it cannot be said that communalism would disappear. But those who dominate others communally could of course look at those so dominated and oppressed, and brand their efforts towards liberation itself as communalism and thereby seek to suppress them. But they could never genuinely wipe out communalism.

In short, we see that on account of mutual mistrust and hatred between communities, the desire of one community to suppress and rule the other, ill-will and stupid rigidity that dominance and privileges gained sometime and for some reason should not be given up, communalism is growing day by day, getting strengthened in these last 30-odd years. Those who blame these communal feelings and seek to suppress it

do so only through accusation, fraud and intimidation. Not a single one of them tries to understand the deeper reality involved much less, to root it out.

Under such circumstances, if someone says that every community struggling to engage in activities to promote the welfare of one's community under the British rule is wrong or degrading, he could only be branded as a fool, stupid or a treacherous conspirator seeking to cheat other communities and bring to dominance one's own. It is only a cowardly, foolish and dishonest act to blame or be intimidated at the very word communalism. We would say, there is nothing to fear from or hate in it.

(Kudi Arasu, May 26, 1935)

Discriminatory differentiation among should be removed so that communalism does not raise its head; communal imperialism should be destroyed; community-justice must be implemented; the fact that ever one in equal in public life must be strengthened; in the sphere of employment the conduct should be according to community-wise justice; only then these communal agitations would abate.

(Kudi Arasu, June 4, 1936)

Only after a movement called the Congress came to be set up in India, communal feelings came to prevail among the people of several religions and classes and such feelings are increasing day by day.

(Kudi Arasu, September 6, 1936)

*The goal of category-wise rightists.* Those, who are demanding category-wise rights are not much concerned with the British dominance remaining here forever or its disappearance tomorrow. If they remain or leave, we are to be concerned mainly with how these our numerous communities of India could live together. For, ever since this Congress came into existence, in these last fifty years, only one community, that is of the Brahmins which has been progressing systematically. All the other communities could progress a little only through this clamour for category-wise representations and even if they do not progress, they could at least prevent themselves from further sliding downwards. When the situation is like this, who would not, we ask, demand for category-wise rights? Therefore, those who desire the political, social or economic improvement of this country, first and foremost should look into the well-being of the rights of their own respective and individual communities and take the necessary steps to reform them. It must be said that in whichever nation, rights of one community is blocked or harassed by another community, there internal disturbance is nurtured and that those very people who so obstruct community rights of others become the stumbling block and enemies to the harmony and progress of that nation itself. It cannot be said that the grant of community rights has ruined any country.

(Kudi Arasu, September 13, 1936)

### **Productive classes turned into Shudras and backward classes**

The practice of granting "reservation" for those who declared themselves "backward," and pleaded some space in the public sphere, started even before the political mobilizations of the castes and communities during the second half of the 19th century. That is, this practice came

into existence, even before the Congress which, throughout its history, resisted any form of group rights on any count, was organized in the fourth quarter of the 19th century. With the dawn of the new century, even when the battle of the Congress against the demands of group rights by the minorities and also the majorities (non-Brahmins) was raging, the Congress could not altogether deny such rights to those who were branded and depressed as the untouchables. Further, in view of their near monopoly and embarrassing occupation of the public sphere, the Brahminical, now aspiring to become the nationalist, had to be seen as fair-minded and inclusive and therefore, could not deny some sort of “concession” at least in the name of backwardness. So, by the time Periyar came on the scene, the demand for “reservation” in the name and acknowledgment of backwardness or depressed-ness had already been established at least for some groups.

However, as we pointed out above, the demand for group rights was raised more importantly on the bases of being “minorities” as well as “majorities.” The basic thrust of these two groups, in contrast to that of those claiming backwardness, was against monopolization of the public sphere, relegation of themselves from participation and for the democratization of the same. When eventually denying space for these groups also became impossible, and political progress, that is, the achievement of independence was being blocked on that count, the Brahminical came under severe pressure to accept at least the “backwardness principle” as being the less costly criterion for extending “reservation/separate rights,” to even those who were clamoring for democratic distribution. That is, if the clamor for democratization by the minorities and non-Brahmins could not altogether be suppressed, the same could be neutralized by partially conceding the demands clearly as “concessions” in the name of backwardness. This compromise had bought enormous ideological gain for the aspiring Brahminical: For one, it moved the focus away from and deflected the challenge to the Brahminical monopolization of the public sphere; secondly, it was premised on the acknowledgment and acceptance of “real” backwardness (that is non-deserving) and thus self-degradation by the beneficiaries; thirdly, this also had its corollary of acknowledging and reproducing the superiority of the Brahminical. Through this compromise, the discourse had been changed beyond all recognition: Gone were those assertive arguments against monopolization of the public sphere and demands for the democratic distribution of the same; in their place pleas of mercy, backwardness and for reservation were brought in as though by a subordinated population.

While many a group accepted the newly emerging scenario, changed their stance and pleaded backwardness in return for reservation, Periyar’s response was quite the opposite. Periyar found that the Brahminical having resisted all along any demand for separate rights, but finding that such resistance was not possible anymore, had taken to the second level of argument, that of concession for backwardness. But he was not willing to grant this also. Including the case of those who argued on the basis of backwardness, he resisted this imposition of the “backward classes discourse” by the Brahminical-turning-nationalist. He challenged how the autonomously laboring, producing and even managing classes of several millennia, the majority of people in the country, could suddenly be transformed into “backwards” at the sweet will of the minuscule, collusive Brahminical and colonial. The emerging dominant discourse was that the entire non-Brahmin population, including religious minorities, was backward and lowly in all spheres by their very nature or birth; and that was the reason why they were not even allowed to be educated to begin with and later resisted from entering schools (*Kudi Arasu*, November 30, 1946). They were all supposed to be people of lowly birth—Shudras—and hence they lacked the necessary intelligence or eligibility. The Brahminically dominant played on the ambiguity, that is whether they were first the Shudras and that was why they lacked intelligence or whether they lacked intelligence first and hence branded as the Shudras!

Anyway, they were all denied entry to schools and colleges because they were the Shudras and hence not entitled for education and government, that is, non-physical employment, which meant they were ordained to do only physical labor. Education and employment were thus not supposed to be their spheres of activity. This was certainly the position of the Brahminical-turned-nationalist—that people should remain in their birth-ordained places! In this way, the colonial-nationalist discourse on backwardness rested on the idea that the majority population of the subcontinent is of the Shudras, which by definition meant people of low birth; the meaning of lowness here definitely included dim-wittedness, that is they are not eligible for mental/governmental work.

Periyar systematically deconstructed this essentialized notion of backwardness. He repeatedly explained how the majority people of the subcontinent were systematically despised, degraded and distorted within the Brahminical varna scheme in and throughout history and that too, in recent history, through the collusive machinations of the socially and politically dominant. Within the Aryan-Brahminical religion, the mass of people was considered and treated as Shudras, with all their despicable attributes, which certainly included a lack of brains, and those who resisted were thrown out of society itself. But this process started only after the entry of this “religion” to the subcontinent and not before that. Further, with the coming of the British, instead of changing things became far worse, with the collusion of the two, that is the self-identified native and the immigrant Aryans. The ritual hierarchy of varna/caste, hitherto prevalent only in the river valleys, under the benevolent auspices of the obliging British became not only the economic and political hierarchies but also the knowledge-merit hierarchy for the entire and newly unified nation! Periyar was at pains to point out that before the coming of the British, production and management of all things and affairs, both secular and religious, through largely physical as well as non-physical efforts were being carried out smoothly by those who today were dubbed as Shudras and unqualified. In those times, the Brahminical was but an indolent, parasitical and merely a consumer group; but today having insinuated itself within the new colonial regime, aggrandized itself under colonial auspices and become partners in the colonial agenda, is flaunting itself as the “forward” and meritorious in every sphere under the sun.

The Brahminical, through its structural association with the British, first of all had transformed the newly unified India as a monolithically caste-organized and Hindu country. This has resulted, in the pushing down of the entire population like the Shudras, that is degraded in the Sasthraic definition as “war-captives,” “progeny of concubines,” by nature physical laborers, born slaves, etc., and thus not eligible for anything legitimately mental or modern. This is the foundational *social degradation*, which is continually being reinforced through reproduction by the rituals, festivals, mythologies and all other irrational aspects of the so-called colonially abetted Hindu religion. Rooted in this comprehensive social degradation is the more recent and all-important degradation in the spheres of education and employment as the backward classes.

Periyar further pointed out that this educational degradation and deprivation came to be more aggravated ever since the Congress came into existence, caused the proliferation of government jobs and mindless and unwarranted upward revision of their salaries, appropriated monopolistically all resources and privileges and systematically practiced “closure” in the spheres of education and employment. Thus, the deprived masses had no other way but to set themselves apart from the Congress, organize themselves, and demand separate rights.

In this way, the modern colonial-nationalist discourse of backwardness is based not on the majority people’s natural backwardness, but on the traditional Brahminical arrogance now ganging up with the modern political colonial. Thus, we are told that the overwhelming majority people of this nation state are *socially* and *educationally* backward. This second dimension of the attributed backwardness has been made possible as suggested above, by past-

ing on to the educational-employment scenario, the very traditional-Brahminical characteristics—literary bias, memory skills, formal compliance, non-inventiveness, slavishness, aversion to physical labor, etc., as the requirements for the entire range of studies and jobs irrespective of their different natures and trajectories. Such a pasting of the Brahminical on to education and recruitment for jobs has had deleterious effects all round: First of all, those with no productive capacities and never had any productive experience are valorized and projected as meritorious in every sphere, and simultaneously, those with such productive capabilities and have been engaged in production for millennia, because they were prevented from acquiring certain formal, mostly articulating, and language skills are rejected as inferior, inefficient and backward. Secondly, because of this, the entire public sphere has come to suffer from lack of any substantive production but characterized by bureaucratic pen-pushing and maintenance of the status quo.

Backwardizing the productive classes in the realm of education and employment, Periyar realized was an ongoing process. Several tactics were being followed to bring this about: The most important of course, was the deployment of same set of criteria—those of memorizing and reproducing—for all jobs in spite of their differential natures and requirements. Periyar time and again insisted that criteria of recruitment must be diversified according to the skills required for the specific jobs. “Memorising and reproducing should not be made the sole test for all kinds of studies; if that is so, only the archakas and purohits could so reproduce” (*Kudi Arasu*, May 25, 1948). Secondly, Periyar condemned the practice of setting high requirements not consonant with the practical need of the jobs. This was a trick of exclusion. He explained how even for merely clerical jobs, bachelor’s degrees were required, thus making it more difficult for less-educated communities unnecessarily. However, Periyar was against setting differential eligibilities for different communities (*Kudi Arasu*, April 1, 1944). Such a practice would certainly imply the acceptance of the Brahminical claim of different ascriptive endowments of different castes and communities or would mean compromising with the required standard. Further, the practice of imposing extraneous requirements such as the knowledge of Sanskrit or Hindi, was another ploy of making it difficult for the non-Brahmins to get into the jobs and Periyar repeatedly condemned this. Under such circumstances, Periyar found that as long as this divisiveness on account of religion and caste prevails among the people and is encouraged by the new political elite, there was no way other than providing for category-wise rights for all mobilized groups, in order to bring about the nation and actualize democracy.

Through this imposition of the backward classes discourse, the Brahminical elite of the country has managed to make permanent the social degradation into which the mass of people of the country as a whole had been pushed into. And the deprivation in the educational-employment scenario of the same mass is to be alleviated only cosmetically and subject to numerous destabilizing conditions like periodic review, removal of the “creamy layer,” fixed quantity so that the existing beneficiaries would resist and fight the new aspirants, etc. Forever backward is the new mandate: For marginal empowerment in education and employment comes only on the recognition and acceptance of social and ascriptive inferiority.

Though more than 150 years have elapsed after the coming of the British rule, aren’t we constrained to say that the seven and a half crores of Untouchables have not become eligible still for freedom in political life? As a result, aren’t they all, having to be looking up to the Government? The 24 crores of non-Brahmin Hindus, with no equal rights in political life, have been reduced to the category of backward classes and are looking up to the Brahmins and Government! What is the reason for this? Are they by birth

not eligible to attain these rights? Or those in high positions, using their influence are oppressing and preventing them from progressing and attaining these rights?

Those who are called the backward classes today, were they all backward before the British came to our country? As most Brahmins were curry favor with the Government and the others were not so, the Government gave all conveniences and rights to the Brahmins, the Brahmins became forward and the others backward. How could these backward classes of people, become forward except through this scheme of category-wise representation? Don't they have brains now? Don't they have power or education? Why are they unable to achieve their rights in proportion to their population?

If we stop giving heavy salaries for big positions, there would not be any difficulty in extending this scheme to any number of groups. In the western countries, for institutions like the Parliament, aren't there only limited number of members, 500 or 1,000, who manage the affairs? This would not be difficult for us. Aren't all fights limited to the question of big salaries? People would not mostly go for power without big salaries. And there would not be many mutual fights. There would not be manipulations to ruin one another. The ideas that the nation is ours, and that we all ought to work for the common welfare of the country would grow automatically. The divisiveness that is prevalent among the people today would disappear. The Government also would not be able to oppress some through some others.

(Kudi Arasu, November 22, 1925)

The white people have been ruling this country for about two hundred years; but still these people are backward and depressed and divided into thousands of groups, placed as high and low, and are in permanent group conflicts with one another. Further, apart from the Brahmins, that is the Aryans, of the other Non-Brahmin peoples, 90 per cent of them are illiterate and unable to put their signature. Who could say, that is not a cruel injustice meted out to them intentionally, but a deficiency consequent to natural development? The Brahmins on the other hand, living under this same rule, are one hundred percent literate, occupying high posts, turning them all to their own benefit, and are controlling, oppressing and suppressing the others. Could anyone say that such a situation is not due to the conspiratorial collusion between the white and brown Aryan, but a natural development?

(Kudi Arasu, March 30, 1946)

Without the Aryan support, the white man's rule in this country cannot last even half a second; in the same way, without the white man's protection and his army, the Aryan life cannot continue in this country even for a second; it has been then, the collusive and conspiratorial contract between the two that enabled the British rule last for two hundred years, the ninety percent citizens of this country remain as backward people, illiterate and without any self-respect; and 95% of them remain as low, degraded, toiling and enslaved.

(Kudi Arasu, May 11, 1946)

It was only after the establishment of the Congress that the entire communities of the Muslims and Dravidian people were reduced to backward communities. They were forced to remain at 10% literacy level; and the Brahmins achieved 100% in education.

It was again on account of the Congress that jobs increased and big jobs like the vakil, judge, doctor, engineer, professor etc., 95% of them came under the monopoly enjoyment of the Brahmins.

(*Kudi Arasu, May 3, 1947*)

The men and women of the Brahmin communities clamour, “Merit! Merit!” Why couldn’t the Government think, whether this “merit” is the copyright of the Brahmins alone? What is the measure of this “merit”? Aren’t the marks they got in their classes that is considered as the measure of their merit? Why can’t those who are engaged in the rhetoric of merit think of this? What is the relation between the marks they got in their lower classes and the professional education they are pursuing? Why can’t they think of this? Having born and grown up in a community which never had anything to do at all with any profession, if they claim total seats in professional education, and ‘merit’ as their birth-right comes in aid of this, which self-respecting Dravidian, we demand to know, would accept this meaningless merit? … those who achieved power in times of ignorance and deception, desire to put on the camouflage of a tiger called ‘merit’ and permanently engage in stage performance and refuse to realise that all their camouflage has been washed away through the sun and rain and that they have been exposed, how long such a fraudulent life is possible?

(*Kudi Arasu, March 20, 1948*)

Because of the deficiencies in social structure and the practice of granting privileges to some communities and withholding the same from the others have been in place for thousands of years, the high caste people alone came to be considered intelligent and meritorious; the Dravidian people, who constitute the 90% of the population came to be considered as low caste and happen to remain without education.

(*Kudi Arasu, May 15, 1948*)

### **Category-wise rights versus reservation for backward classes**

The Brahminical elite of this country, as it was turning nationalist, resisted all forms of separate or group rights. When this was not possible, it switched on to the new gear of “reservation for backward classes.” But Periyar, from the very beginning, was insisting on “category-wise rights.” These were two distinct and antagonistic discourses, the former being a strategy of ruling and the latter an expression of mass aspirations. The fact that it has been the former which has successfully been imposed on the social polity, the meaning and import of the latter has more or less vanished from the academic consciousness but survives in altered forms within the continued peoples’ struggles everywhere. More recently it definitely shows signs of revival in the country. It is necessary, to retrieve some elements at least of the latter, if only to derive more and critical advantage of the former.

The scheme of category-wise rights was envisaged, elaborated and engaged with by Periyar as the second-best and temporary principle and practice for bringing about, equality, national unity and actualizing democracy in a caste-community and conflict-ridden society in the throes of entering into modernity. It was also a vanguard movement, before the launch of any meaningful liberal democratic practice. It was inspired by a moral fury at the contemporary scenario of overwhelming illegitimate monopolization and immoral usurpation of the public space and national resources by a few communities and the corresponding marginalization and suppres-

sion of the majority of people, the productive and laboring classes. It aimed at liquidating that monopoly and releasing the spaces and resources to all castes and communities equally and without discrimination. It operates on the basis of rights or entitlements. It was a scheme of empowerment with a definite potential for emancipation.<sup>15</sup> It was based on an egalitarian and secular understanding of human beings and thus had the inherent potential for transformation of a caste-ridden society into a caste-less one.

The scheme of reservation for the backward classes reluctantly conceded and only partially and unevenly implemented by the state is but a political weapon of appeasement and worse still, of co-option. As it was wrested out of the unwilling hands, it is full of prevarications and loaded with increasing and ever newer conditionalities. It is based on a differential, discriminatory and traditional understanding of humans. It is extended out of political compulsion to what have been insistently called the undeserving segments of the population. It is intended and accordingly achieves the purpose of maintaining the status quo of the caste society. It is granted on the condition that one acknowledges and accepts one's own ascriptive inferiority and degraded condition within the so-called and modernly created political religion of Hinduism. This operates not on the basis of rights but on the discretion and clemency of the elite. Time and again, we are told, that this scheme operates purely on the benevolence of the ruling establishment. This is a scheme of cosmetic empowerment with enormous potential for enslavement and co-option.

As the British were receding and the Brahminical-nationalist taking hold of the situation towards the middle of the 20th century, the discourse of reservation for the backward classes was steadily and surely overtaking that of category-wise rights also in the Madras Presidency. Finally, it was inscribed in the statute book with much ambiguity and hesitation. The new façade was that of inaugurating liberal democracy with a lot of fanfare. The options before the category-wise rightists had been to achieve as much substance as possible within the newer and humiliating discourse, even when the emancipatory ideology of the former could not be retrieved. Both Independence Day in 1947 and Republic Day in 1950, were declared by Periyar as days of mourning. These occasions symbolized for him the sealing of the fate of the majority people of the country as the Shudras within the colonially-abetted Hinduism and by the same token they also became the backward classes within the new dispensation.

### **Self-respect and category-wise rights**

Periyar's struggle for category-wise rights covered the three important aspects of public life—education, employment and political representation. His point was that in the emergent nation and actualizing democracy, if the intermediary groups are not being allowed or encouraged to disappear, at least until they do so disappear, should constitute the base for the distribution of the available rights and resources. His was a struggle for the inclusive and proportionate empowerment of all groups so that these groups getting their due share will forge unity among themselves and actualize democracy in participatory parity. Indeed, this was the political dimension of his overall struggle for what he termed Self Respect.

Periyar did not have much respect for the current educational, employment and representational practices. The education he found then, merely gave a license for getting a job; it was not what it was originally intended to be—formation of character through imparting of relevant and useful knowledge. Employment, particularly government employment, for which there was such a rapacious and mindless competition, was for him all about amassing money through slavishness; time and again he described government jobs, as “salary dacoity” (*Kudi Arasu*, November 15, 1925); and he thought, rightly so, that it was the Congress movement which was the most responsible for this; he also censured their endless proliferation merely with the view to accom-

modate friends, relatives and caste-men; the employed people he found singularly selfish, lacking in public spirit, leave alone service-mindedness (*Kudi Arasu*, January 24, 1945). He indeed made a pointed suggestion that if the unwarrantedly enormous salaries, perks and privileges of government employment be reduced, the fierce and antagonistic competition among the various communities would cease immediately (*Kudi Arasu*, November 22, 1925). Of political representation, he had but plain contempt for most of its practitioners; to his utter disgust, he found most of the politicians were in public life only in order to maximize their private gain. All three spheres were tied up in a rat race for what could only be called “jobbery” and had nothing to do with either public morality, service or concern for the larger society.

However, as aspects of the emergent public sphere in a struggling democracy, he found them all loaded with rights, power and resources; and hence were not to be allowed to be cornered by select groups but intended for participation and appropriation by all equally without discrimination; hence was his struggle for category-wise rights. He found the very monopolization by the Brahminical elements of the public sphere in India was done in the name of their own group-ascriptive superiority and their overweening religious dominance but projected as individual achievement. They were supported in their venture not only by the traditional religion, but also modern-nationalist politics. When they were forced to concede some space for the others, they did that within the very self-same framework of ascriptive degradation of the masses—as the Shudras and backwards; that is, these latter were conceded space, though they were not eligible but out of condescension for the backwards!

Though, Periyar's struggle for category-wise rights was trajectory against all these aspects of the Brahminical dominance, he found that this form of struggle alone would not achieve any emancipation. At best, it could only produce some and symbolic empowerment, and at worst, would increase the number of slaves and traitors! “Even if any amount of posts and positions and political freedoms are accumulated, unless social revolution takes place, this situation is not going to change” (*Kudi Arasu*, September 22, 1940). In order to achieve empowerment as part and parcel of a more comprehensive emancipatory process, or in Periyar's words, to move away from social degradation and achieve empowerment with self-respect and dignity to which all humans are entitled, he had to go after and attack the foundational premises of the *social degradation* itself—the traditional religion with all its irrationalities, obscenities and divisiveness and also the modern form of nationalist politics which only upheld the same traditional in and through some sugar and secular coating. It was these, which became the main target of attacks under the complex banner of self-respect, rationality and humanity. He declared war against all forms of traditional and modern unjust practices, perpetrated by the emergent Brahminical middle classes in the name of religion and nationalist politics; and he visualized his struggle for category-wise rights as couched within this larger emancipatory agenda. Without achieving self-respect and a sense of individual and group dignity by emancipating themselves, moving away from the encircling Brahminical Hinduism now gradually declaring itself as the liberal-secular democracy, no amount of education, employment and political representation within the existing framework would deliver the genuine and desired results (*Kudi Arasu*, August 11, 1940; September 22, 1940; June 29, 1946). Hence his war on all fronts—religious superstitions, caste degradations, women's slavery and a relentless push towards democratization of society and rationalization of life in general.<sup>16</sup>

If the ascendant Brahminical was foisting degraded social and administrative identities—the Shudras and backwards, Periyar did not meekly accept these because of some minor concessions these identities brought along but countered them with the others derived from mass aspirations and struggles. First, it was the non-Brahmin, understood inclusively and ideologically. Periyar's category of the non-Brahmin should be understood differently from what went before him in Justice Party circles and also what came after him in the later political movements.

In contrast to these two, first of all Periyar did not make a distinction between the backward and depressed classes for ideological purposes. While there was already well-established leadership and mobilization of a distinct category called Depressed Classes and later Adi Dravidas, Periyar did not make any such distinction in the course of his struggle except in their favor. He laid greater emphasis on the so-called untouchables both when criticizing social degradation and highlighting the need for category-wise rights: For example, he said, “We would proclaim from the top of the tower that more than the category-wise representation of the non-Brahmin Hindus, it is the category-wise representation of the untouchable communities which is important” (*Kudi Arasu*, August 11, 1925). Further, his term non-Brahmin did not merely refer to the mass category of people other than the Brahmins; it was also a political and ideological category meaning an alternative way and view of life, which could include certain conditions even those who were born as Brahmins. Periyar moved on quickly to the term “Dravidian.” Once again, the term needs to be understood in a specific sense; the fact he derived the terms “Aryan” and “Dravidian” from the current racial and orientalist usages, should not blind us to Periyar’s deployment of these terms basically in a political sense. In his vocabulary, the term “Aryan” primarily means one who identified oneself as such and believed in and practiced varna/caste; and the term, “Dravidian” was its corollary, that is, one who rejects the pernicious varna/caste and is to be identified as such. From there on, Periyar moved to culturalize this basically political concept into a Tamil identity. But he forever insisted that this process of culturalization of identity does not waver from the path of rationalization of social life, the most important aspect of which was the unambiguous rejection of caste.

Self-respect for Periyar was a movement leading away from the social and the consequent administrative degradation of the Shudras and backwards and setting up an identity consonant with the age-long non- and anti-Brahminical tradition of the subcontinent but more especially of Tamil Nadu. Struggle for category-wise rights formed for him, a part and parcel of such a comprehensive and radical struggle for emancipation. For him, empowerment within the caste-framework, was not emancipation or could not be sustained for long, as it proved to be the case elsewhere on the subcontinent. In contrast, because the struggle for “reservation” was cast in the mode of struggle for category-wise rights and was in its turn, couched within a radical and emancipatory framework, that something at least of the substance of the self-respect movement could be retained, albeit with great difficulty, in the Tamil Nadu scheme of reservation in the post-independence period.

### **Conclusion: On inscribing liberal democracy**

Periyar’s overall struggle for achieving self-respect for the mass of people of this country and his struggle in particular for achieving category-wise rights for all groups, need to be seen in the context of the tortuous and contesting emergence of the nation state and liberal democracy in a caste-community-divided and colonized country. The Brahminical class which had taken on the role of the nationalist leadership stoutly refused to countenance any form of group rights under the pretext of ushering in national unity/liberal democracy. Under the concrete circumstances however, that is, in the context of the colonially valorized Brahminical Hinduism and heightened socio-political divisiveness, this could only at best be interpreted as the call for inscribing formal equality in polity. It does not require much political acumen to discern what could be the effect of such an over-imposition of formal equality, that is illusory presumption that all are equally positioned, on seriously fragmented and hierarchically placed social groups. If the unequally developed and hierarchically placed social groups are blindly and intentionally presumed to be equal among themselves, and the state mechanically takes to the task of protect-

ing the formal liberty and equality of all in the name of Fundamental Rights, particularly when no systematic effort was on the policy agenda to actually bring about the equalization of groups through uniform and universal education, the practice could only reinforce and reproduce the existing inequalities, though under the glorified name of liberal democracy. This indeed has been happening in post-independence India.

In the event of course, some concessions for “backwardness” were wrested out of the unwilling hands of the dominant; once agreed upon (has it ever been agreed upon?), these concessions were sought to be projected as the very and sole means, granted by the “magnanimous” leadership for equalizing the unequally placed groups! The truth certainly lies elsewhere, and it speaks volumes for local academia which has not so far investigated it either seriously or systematically. The concessions in the name of backwardness, wrenched out of the unwilling but state-constituting leadership bear all marks of political appeasement and not a sincere effort for equalizing the unequally placed groups. First, of all, there has been no settled consensus on the issue and even legally inscribed provisions are repeatedly being raked up with impunity; secondly, what has been promised so long ago has not been fulfilled even by one fourth; thirdly, continuous efforts are on at all levels to scuttle, withdraw or deny what has been promised on the paper; fourthly, what was originally intended as an additional support has mostly been transformed into what could be the maximum aspired for by the groups; fifthly, even presuming that everything promised would be fulfilled faithfully, the inscribed scheme of reservation has very little to do with the more complex process of equalizing unequal groups.

It was against such an ideologically loaded scenario that the struggle of Periyar for category-wise rights, couched in its turn within a broader and more radical framework of overall rationalization of society, gains enormous significance. The trajectory of his holistic struggle clearly was for the achievement of “substantial equality” under concrete circumstances. Implementation of category-wise rights for Periyar was the intermediate stage of coaxing all groups to achieve parity in participation and appropriation. The functioning of full-fledged liberal democracy will have to wait, it needs to be brought about through concerted and consensual efforts. Quick-fix methods proffered in sugar-coated jargon, could only mean fraud on the masses. His argument and struggle for participatory and appropriatory parity among the unequally located social groups definitely involved (and this was his specific point) the giving up of traditional privileges and unjust usurpation of the public sphere by the dominant/aggressive sections, overall rationalization of society and active and comradely invitation of the hitherto relegated sections into the emergent public sphere. This multi-faceted process has been observed in all those occasions where liberal democracies have been set up. And in Periyar’s view, India cannot claim an exception to this rule.<sup>17</sup>

## Notes

- 1 It is to be noted that Ambedkar also was against the formation of the Constitutional Assembly, but eventually, when called upon to participate in the proceedings, chose to join ranks with the idea that at least the interests of the depressed classes could be protected for the future. For a critical review of the circumstances surrounding Ambedkar’s change of mind in collaborating with the Congress, see Bandyopadhyay (2000).
- 2 See Patel’s panegyric on individual and individualism in the Constitutional Assembly on January 24, 1947. For the nationalist insistence of the superiority of communitarian over the individualist way of life, see Aloysius (1997).
- 3 For the elaboration of the Weberian notion of “social closure,” see Murphy (1988).
- 4 In the footnotes, Professor Galanter comments how Ambedkar himself had rejected the proposed amendment in the Constitutional Assembly, of Professor K. T. Shah to include a clause enabling the state to make special provisions for the betterment of Scheduled Castes and Tribes saying that such a provision would open the route for “segregated facilities” (Galanter, 1984, p. 367).

- 5 This new historiographical consensus concerning the colonial impact on the subcontinent—valorization of the Brahminical Casteism—a new academic discovery, interestingly was pointed out already by the contemporary social ideologues themselves; Periyar for one was acutely sensitive to this and the collusive nature of colonialism between the Brahminical and the British finds articulation consistently in the pages of *Kudi Arasu* and *Viduthalai*. Further, a systematic treatment of the same subject could be found in the *Menace of Hindu Imperialism* (1946), authored by Swami Dharmattheertha. Note that Ambedkar also identified the governing class in contemporary India as the Brahminical.
- For the numerous and proliferating academic references of the same refer, Aloysius, 1997, 1998 & 2010.
- 6 This is an extremely condensed and functionally formulated version of the British impact on the caste-religion fragmented subcontinental society. See Aloysius (2010), for more elaborate treatment of the same subject.
- 7 For an understanding of how the Brahminical bureaucracy has come to subdue and also shape the other sectors of political economy, see Lal (1988).
- 8 Studies of pre- or early-colonial Tamilakam are many and insightful. Important among them are Ludden (1985), Dirks (1987), Baker (1984) and Washbrook (1993).
- 9 The Colonial change of policy from unilateral support to the dominant Brahminical to other sections of the population has been noted by many an author. Important among them is Gordon (1973), see particularly pp 64–5.
- 10 For a casual survey of the different forms of peoples' own efforts and their single trajectory of the appropriation of the emergent public sphere, see Aloysius (1997).
- 11 Within this generalized plank of historical marginalization and ascriptive lowliness, Iyoothee Thassar's writings would represent a single exception, which headlong challenged the notion and label of the depressed being imposed on the so-called untouchables. See, Aloysius (2009).
- 12 Refer to Viswanathan (1983) for details of what have been mentioned of Periyar's early political life. Despite being somewhat antagonistic to Periyar and his ways, the author more or less accurately documents this part of Periyar's life.
- 13 Periyar's struggle has been often enough mindlessly identified with the “non-Brahmin,” considered as an organic unity. Nothing could be further from the truth; he was forever pushing the policy towards inclusion of the more relegated and marginalized; he did not also hesitate to engage in severe criticism of the so-called “non-Brahminical” also; see, *Kudi Arasu*, July 13, 1930; March 29, 1947; April 12, 1947.
- 14 The term “participatory parity” is from Fraser (2008).
- 15 For a distinction between empowerment and emancipation and its implications, see Inglis (1997).
- 16 Periyar's struggle against gender degradation and women's slavery as part as parcel of emancipation from the re-valorized Brahminical Hinduism is not as well known. It was he, for the first time in the 1970s who raised the demand for 50 percent of “reservation” for women (*Viduthalai*, March 4, 1970; October 3, 1972). See, his *Women Enslaved* (2009).
- 17 Ambedkar (2009) delineated this process of the nation's emergence in the cases of France and Japan; he pointed out how in contrast to those countries where the traditional elite came forward to surrender their privileges, in India, the Brahminical class in the name of building the nation sought to reinforce its traditional privileges and also accumulate more at the expense of the hitherto relegated masses.

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# 9

## Dr LOHIA'S SOCIALIST THOUGHT AND EMPOWERING PEOPLE

*Simhadri Somanaboina and Akhileshwari Ramagoud*

### Introduction

Ram Manohar Lohia (23 March, 1910–12 October, 1967) was not just a visionary thinker but a fighter as well. He was a champion of social justice with an uncommon understanding of such issues as caste and gender. In both these areas, he was perhaps one of the pioneers of his time with deep insight into the workings of the Indian society. His understanding of such issues as caste was uncommon, as was his empathy for the condition of women. The solutions he suggested to eliminate caste and gender inequalities, among others, were equally ahead of their time. His contribution to the understanding of the caste system continues to guide modern day thinkers and activists.

The best description of Lohia came from himself. He referred to himself as “*sapermaina*,” a term he coined from a unit of the British army, the Sappers and Miners, who were considered frontline combatants who not only cleared the roads and built bridges for their forces to advance during wars but also made the way safe for their troops by clearing mines and so on. They were the first line of defense of forces marching against the enemy to defeat him (Kapoor 2010a).

Lohia was truly a *sapermaina*, who walked ahead of everybody in his fight against social evils, clearing the way for others to follow him. He had no fear in taking up issues that lesser persons would hesitate to, whether it was to oppose, post-independence, the Congress Party and especially taking on the highly popular Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, or in advocating equality for women in a deeply misogynistic society or in urging the youth to revolt against caste so that it would lead to the resurrection of India.

Lohia and his contribution to social issues like caste and gender inequality, apart from others, remained on the margins of history of movements of the marginalized, and even in the history of the freedom movement, perhaps due to three reasons: 1) His relentless criticism of India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, his policies, the way he governed, and his inclination to patronize Brahmins in his government and administration; 2) His criticism of the upper castes, holding them responsible for every weakness in society due to their bigoted beliefs and practice of casteism; and 3) His opposition to communism did not win him any friends from among the followers of communism. Several thinkers and scholars of those days who were deeply committed to communism played a major role in post-independence India in giving ideological leadership in the formulation of policies and in the writing and interpreting of India's modern history.

While B. R. Ambedkar, Lohia's contemporary, became the leading icon of the Dalits and E.V. Ramasami Periyar of the anti-Brahmin school of thought, Lohia remained in the background, literally unacknowledged, unrecognized and unappreciated. Although the backward class movement from 1980s onwards was deeply influenced by Lohia's thought, especially in the northern states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, unfortunately, he has failed to emerge as an icon on the Indian social justice scene despite the emergence of caste as a major basis for political and social movements in the past few decades in India. However, a welcome development in the recent past is that reformers such as Jotiba Phule, Savitribai Phule, Narayan Guru, Shahu Maharaj and others have been reclaimed by the Backward Castes, and their philosophies not just studied but also celebrated. Lohia's thought and philosophy are relevant even today, especially on the two important questions of caste and gender.

While Lohia was a Gandhian and a socialist in the Indian National Congress party before independence, he turned against Congress and Nehru post-independence, and literally waged a war against them for their casteist, classist outlook, fighting elections against them (and losing too). His views on caste and gender, being dealt with in this chapter, were formulated in this period. He first raised the question of caste in the Socialist Party's conference held at Kanpur in March 1947. Having achieved the objective of independence, Lohia turned his attention to social issues since he believed that mere political freedom would not rid Indian society of its divisions such as those created by caste and gender.

Lohia was totally committed to the removal of all inequalities and destruction of injustice in all its forms, whether inter-nations or intra-nation, between classes and castes, between races and color, between different religions, between man and woman. One of the most remarkable analysis Lohia made was with regard to women. He included women as one of the five oppressed groups in India along with the backward castes, the Muslims, the Dalits and the Adivasis. He believed that women of all castes, including women of the upper castes were oppressed. He was far ahead of his time and understood the workings of a patriarchal society that treated women as inferior and not worthy of equal rights along with the men. Lohia held that the women of upper castes were no less oppressed by patriarchy than women of lower castes. He considered women, irrespective of caste, as people needing special attention by the policy makers as other oppressed groups like the backward castes, the backward communities in minorities such as Muslims and Christians, Dalits and Adivasis.

Only a person who was deeply involved with the society, one who was not just far-sighted but politically rooted in the culture and traditions of the society would have such clear understanding of the society and its people, especially the equation between the powerful and the oppressed.

### **Early days of Ram Manohar Lohia**

Ram Manohar Lohia was born on 23 March, 1910, at Akbarpur, now part of the state of Uttar Pradesh, India. His father Hiralal Lohia was a prosperous trader belonging to the Bania caste, the traditional business caste. His mother, Chanda Devi, died in 1912, when he was just two years old. His father did not remarry. Lohia grew up greatly influenced by his Gandhian father who remained his political guide and mentor.

He attended the Banaras Hindu University to complete his intermediate course work in 1927. He then joined the Vidyasagar College, under the University of Calcutta and in 1929, earned his BA degree. He decided to attend Frederick William University (today's Humboldt University of Berlin, Germany). He soon learned German and received financial assistance based on his outstanding academic performance, studying national economy as his major subject as

a doctoral student from 1929 to 1933. Lohia qualified for a doctorate for his thesis on “Salt Taxation in India,” focusing on Gandhi’s socio-economic theory and his Salt Satyagraha.

### **Lohia on caste**

Lohia was not merely an idealist. He was a thinker and a doer too. All inequalities bothered him, and he found that they were everywhere around him. He wanted to end every kind of inequality in our society, whether it was inequality of status of birth, of caste, class, gender, race, color of skin or between the rich and poor countries. He interpreted history, society and its practices/traditions, through the lens of equality. He believed that these practices/traditions, in turn, gave birth to certain attitudes, aptitudes and fostered a social behavior that normalized various kinds of inequalities with the passage of time (Kapoor 2010a).

The practice of the caste system for hundreds of years by Indian society had wrought several disabilities among its people. First, it divided its people into superior and inferior. Then, it limited capabilities to a few, dismissing the rest as unworthy. This identification of some as worthy, intelligent, and capable and the rest condemned as worthless, incapable of thinking and incapacitated by birth of any intellectual activity led to several negative consequences that deeply impacted society. However, scholars and other thinking persons were unable to both read them or even recognize them as deeply harmful to overall society. For instance, Lohia theorized that India’s different kingdoms, throughout its history, had not been able to withstand aggressions by the enemy mainly due to the division within its society into several hundred castes. He disagreed with scholars who said that internal quarrels and intrigues were some of the reasons for the Indian kingdoms succumbing to external aggressions. According to Lohia, the single major cause of the defeats was caste.

While talking about defeats and weaknesses we always centre our attention on internal discords and riots. It is always *Jaichands*<sup>1</sup> and *Mir Jafars*<sup>2</sup> who are made villains of our country. Every school child must know that the aggressors have won not because of internal quarrels of the kings but because of the indifference of the people. The greatest cause of this indifference is caste. Caste brings indifference and indifference brings defeat.\

(Kapoor 2010b)

Analyzing the system in depth, Lohia says that caste has bred certain traits and aptitudes in society.

(Those belonging to) castes of inferior skill are downgraded. They congeal into an almost lifeless mass. They cease to be the reservoir from which the nation may refresh and renew itself. (On the other hand), the numerically small castes (possessing) the most superior skills are the habitual providers of the nation’s leadership. In order to maintain their most unnatural dominance, (these castes) became a seething mass of chicanery, but most smooth and cultured. (Thus) the masses are lifeless, the elite are chicane. Caste has done that.

(Lohia 1964b)

Lohia believed that caste was harming India because, in his words, “the needs of caste are at war with those of the nation.” He was unsparing of the Dwijas or high castes as he held them responsible for the prevailing superficial scholarship, hypocrisy, craftiness, fraud, lies, injustice and

lack of commitment to the wellbeing of the nation. Caste perpetuated all these and hence was the main source of damage to the nation. In his words,

What goes as scholarship in the country is but a name of a style of speech and grammar rather than substance and knowledge. To beg is believed to be less shameful than to do manual work for through beggary of certain higher types, the giver is favored with inestimable benefits in the other world.

(*Lohia 1964b*, p. 82)

As for those in public life and in government, mostly the Dwijas, he said,

Craftiness, open submission and secret insubordination become the mark of successful men of state rather than virtues of straight dealing and bravery. Lie is enthroned as the supreme virtue of public life. A general atmosphere of fraud prevails to protect caste-man and (caste) relations become an aim rather than protecting justice and nation well-being. In essence, the needs of caste are at war with those of the nation; caste prevails because it is the only reliable re-insurance of the individual against calamity or routine ill-being.

In his book, *The Caste System*, Lohia wrote:

Caste is the most overwhelming factor in Indian life. Those who deny (it) in principle, accept (it) in practice. Life moves within the frontiers of caste and cultured men speak in soft tones against the system of caste, while its rejection in action just does not occur to them. In fact, they hurl the charge of caste-mindedness against those who remind them of it on the plea that while they engage in healthy debate on principles and great outlines, their critics vitiate the discussion by bringing into it the polluted sphere of action. It is the critics, so they say, who create the atmosphere of caste. Who knows, the strange split between thought and action, characteristic of Indian culture more than of any other, is not the result predominantly of caste?

(*Lohia 1964b*)

He continues:

The great facts of life such as birth, death, marriage, feast and other rituals move within the frame of caste. Men belonging to the caste assist each other at these decisive acts. Men of other castes are there at the periphery, more or less bystanders and onlookers. ... But the great schism between the high-caste and the low-caste is as great as ever, if not greater, in the sphere of real collective action.

(*Lohia 1964b*, pp. 79–80)

Lohia was critical of the monopoly established by the upper castes over government and political positions in spite of the fact that they comprised barely one-fifth of the entire population. This monopoly led to the atrophy of society, making the nation unhealthy and taking it to the verge of death.

On no account do the high castes comprise more than one-fifth of India's population. But they keep to themselves almost four-fifths of the nation's leadership. In respect of

the top leadership of the four main departments of national activity, business, army, high civil services and political parties, the high castes easily comprise four-fifths. When we talk of top leadership of political parties we mean not the members of the legislatures but the directing executives, which choose them. When more than four-fifths of a nation's vital leadership is traditionally selected from among the one-fifths of its population, a state of atrophy is bound to ensue. Four-fifths of its population sinks into a state of listlessness and inefficiency. A nation is sick and continuously on the point of death.

To set right this injustice and to revitalize the dying nation, Lohia suggested that a “designed selection of leadership” needed to be made. That is, 50–60 percent of the nation’s top leadership should be selected “by design” from among the lower castes (Lohia 1964b, p. 80).

### **Peaceful revolution**

Lohia was a committed Gandhian and a strong advocate of satyagraha. Lohia was an equally committed socialist, but he differed with the communists over the principle that no privileged group gives up its privileges without a fight and hence, a violent revolution was necessary to bring about equality. On the other hand, Lohia believed that the change could be brought about peacefully if the Dwijas voluntarily gave up their superior position to the Shudras or the lower castes. “The young high caste must now rise to his full measure. Instead of seeing in this policy (of uplifting downgraded castes) as an attack on his interest, he should view it for its capacity to renew the people.” (Lohia 1964b, p. 104). His call was specifically to the Dwija youth. He hoped that the Dwija youth would turn itself into a manure for the lower caste so that the “(the lower caste) people may, for once, flower into their full glory.” He wanted them to “turn over the soil” of society, by voluntarily giving up their position and accommodating the lower castes in their positions. This role reversal, according to Lohia, should be a peaceful process, with full awareness among the youth of the huge injustice heaped on the lower castes for thousands of years and with a desire to undo this injustice. He was of the view that the battle against the caste system should be fought not in an atmosphere of bitterness but in an atmosphere of mutual trust and sympathy.

### **Caste as anti-change force**

Lohia literally could read the mind of the original framers of caste and analyzed how it benefited the Dwija people and how it impacted negatively the lower castes. As he said, the system of caste was basically an anti-change force. As a “terrifying” source of “stability,” caste cemented the prevailing “meanness, dishonor and lie” among the Dwijas.

These high castes must maintain their rule, both political, economic and, of course, religious. They cannot do it alone through gun. They must instill a sense of inferiority into those whom they seek to govern and exploit. This they can best do it by turning themselves into a select caste, with speech, dress, manners and living of which the lower castes are incapable.

(Lohia 1964b, pp. 83–4)

The country’s political parties, which were being run by the Dwijas, were governed by this consideration of having to instill a complex of inferiority among the mass of people. Therefore,

people's languages were undeveloped, their housing and general style of living incapacitating them from "good and great action" and their mind as not worth considering. Thus, he said, "the high castes weave the net of illusion."

As for the political behavior of the lower castes, Lohia said it could be explained by the years of ideological slavery they were subjected to that had led to their stagnation:

centuries (of subjugation) have instilled into them a meek acceptance of the existing, aversion to change, sticking with the caste in times of adversity as in good luck, and the search for high life through worship, rituals and general politeness.

(*Lohia 1964b, p. 85*)

In his view, the caste system impaired the thought processes and robbed the country of fresh ideas in the following manner:

Caste restricts opportunity. Restricted opportunity constricts ability. Constricted ability further restricts opportunity. Where caste prevails, opportunity and ability are restricted to ever-narrowing circles of people ... India's experience is conclusive proof that caste turns a country into (an) arid desert of intellectual inadequacy.

(*Lohia 1964b, p. XX*).

Lohia spoke out against the hypocrisy, double standards and insincerity of the upper castes especially those who were part of the political and administrative establishments, basically, the movers and shakers of an independent India. These were "false advocates of destruction caste" in Lohia's words, which group of people condemned caste but left the caste structure intact. These people would loudly proclaim caste as evil but would equally vigorously condemn those who took "active steps" to destroy it. This group believed that an increased standard of living and merit and equal opportunities dissolve caste. As Lohia argued, rising standards of living and opportunities would not be restricted to the low castes alone.

When everybody has an equal opportunity, the caste with 5000 years-old tradition of liberal education would be on top. Only the exceptionally gifted from the lower castes would be able to break this tradition. This is what Indian's political parties, Congress, Communist and Praja Socialist under Mr. (Prime Minister Jawaharlal) Nehru's leadership had in mind. They would want men and women of exceptional ability from the lower castes to join their ranks. But they would want the (caste) structure as a whole to be kept intact. They are themselves drawn overwhelmingly from the high castes. They have no hesitation in denouncing their caste or the distinction of high and low castes, as long as their social group based on tradition, ability and manners is left unaffected. If anybody qualifies in ability and manners from among the lower castes he is welcome. But how many would qualify? Very few. It would be the battle of 5000 years of oppressive training and tradition against an individual talent. Only the genius or the exceptionally able would win this battle. To make this battle a somewhat equal encounter, unequal opportunities would have to be extended to those who have so far been suppressed.

(*Lohia 1964b*)

Lohia saw through the unwillingness of the upper castes to give up their caste privilege although they vehemently opposed caste in their talk. Lohia pointed out:

The intelligentsia of India which is overwhelmingly high caste, abhors all talk of a mental and social revolution, of a radical change in respect of language or caste or bases of thought. It talks generally, and in principle, against caste. In fact, it can be most vociferous in its theoretical condemnation of caste, so long as it can be allowed to be equally vociferous in raising the banner of merit and equal opportunity.

He saw through India's political class which was predominantly upper caste.

India's political parties, Congress or Communist, under Nehru's leadership, are thoroughly hostile to the award of preferential treatment on any large scale. They denounce it as a caste-motivated measure while they are themselves viciously caste-ridden, perhaps unknowingly. They denounce caste by birth but in enthroning the principle of merit, they keep secured their privileged position.

(*Lohia 1964b*, p. 97)

Dr. Lohia outlined the “true struggle against caste,” which he says should be on the agenda of Indian history.

This struggle aims to pitchfork five downgraded groups of society, women, Shudras, SCs, Muslims and Adivasis into a position of leadership irrespective of their merit as it stands today ... The tests of merit are also such as to favour the high caste. What long ages of history have done must be undone by a crusade ... A restoration of self-respect through the abolition of caste, of course, when it goes side by side with economic uplift, can rouse them into the activity of full men and awakened people. Let it not be forgotten that the high caste Dwijas had also suffered grievously from the atrophy of the people (with) their education and cultures hid(ing) under the veneer of good speech and manners (and) the deadly poison of lie and self-advancement through deceit.

(*Lohia 1964b*, p. 102)

Lohia asserted that unless the caste system was abolished, democracy and socialism would not function properly in India. Lohia launched a crusade against the caste system on both social and political fronts to rouse the sentiments and feelings of the masses. Lohia said, “To stop talking of ‘caste’ is to shut one’s eyes to the most important single reality of the Indian institution. One does not end caste merely by wishing it away” (*Lohia 1964b*, p. 127). Lohia wrote, “Although caste as a mature institution is confined to India, it is universal as essence and incipient beginning. Caste is immobile class. Loosening caste is class. This slow swing between class and caste has so far been a law of human history” (*Lohia 1996*).

Lohia believed that political and economic revolutions as an answer to inequalities in society, as postulated by socialism, would not bring about parity in society. For instance, in Europe changing classes, doing away with private property and increasing wages and bonuses of workers would not erase the distinction between the manual workers and those with brains, that is the managers and the like who take decisions. But in India where castes are fixed, unchangeable, this distinction would spell ruin to the health of society. Workers with brain are a fixed caste in Indian society; together with the soldier caste, they are the high caste. Even after the completed economic and political revolution, they would continue to supply the managers of the state and industry. The mass of the people would be kept in a state of perpetual physical and mental lowliness at least comparatively. But the position of the high caste would then be justified on grounds of ability and in economic terms, as it is now on the ground of birth and talent. What it loses in

respect of caste by birth, it gains in respect of caste by merit. Its merit concerning speech, grammar, manners, capacity to adjust, routine efficiency is undisputed. Five thousand years have gone into the building of this undisputed merit. (Pathak 2019)

### **Destruction of caste system**

Lohia wanted nothing less than total destruction of the caste system. He believed that until the caste system was totally eliminated, Indian society would not be reconstructed and rejuvenated. Since caste had stratified Indian society and had resulted in the stagnation of the majority of people, especially the lower castes in terms of abilities for lack of opportunities, Lohia suggested that preferential opportunities be given to the lower castes and other similarly deprived groups like women, Scheduled Castes, Adivasis and Muslims which would improve their abilities and in turn, further increase their opportunities. He believed that such preferential opportunities could be given for two to four decades which would bring the majority of the people on a par with the small minority that was holding sway on every aspect of life. “A true doctrine of equal opportunity would have to undo the work of 5000 years by giving preferential treatment to the lower castes over a period of at least a few decades,” said Lohia (1964).

Lohia called for a revolt against caste if India were to come alive once again. Lohia explained the meek acceptance by the lower castes and their aversion to change in the following words:

The political behavior of the lower castes would appear to be little less inexplicable on the assumption that a long tradition of ideological subjection has made them stagnate ... centuries have instilled into them a meek acceptance of the existing, aversion to change, sticking with the caste in times of adversity as of good luck, and the search for high life through worship, rituals and general politeness.

(*Lohia 1964b, p. 85*)

Yet he had hope that the situation would change, and caste would be destroyed.

Revolt against caste is the resurrection of India ... The attack on caste is not single-barreled. It does not climax into a shrill cry devoid of action. It is, in fact, as political as it is social. From the political attack on caste, in the sense of drawing the nation's leadership from all the castes in the country, may come that revolution which gives to all Indian society the solidarity and re-insurance now given to smaller groups by caste.

However, in this fight against caste, he struck a note of caution for the youth of the lower castes, women of all castes, Muslims, Dalits and Adivasis.

a great burden rests on the youth of the lower castes. Not the aping of the high caste in all its traditions and manners, not dislike of manual labour, not individual self-advancement, not bitter jealousy, but the staffing of the nation's leadership, as it were, with some sacral work should now be the supreme concern of women, Shudras, Harijans, Muslims and Adivasis.

(*Lohia 1964b, p. 105*)

### **Caste as congealing of money and status**

An interesting theory of Lohia was that caste was nothing but the congealing of money and status. Today, most of the so-called upper castes are actually Shudras who due to their enterprise,

acquired wealth and thus, acquired status that brought them level with the traditional upper castes. Lohia sums it up thus:

The well-to-do Bania, the wholesaler, of ancient time became Vyshya ... the wholesaler or the well-to-do remained the Vyshya while the rest became the Bania. The vast mass of Bania caste, the Teli, the Jaiswal, the Pansari and the like are treated by orthodoxy as Shudra. They are the retailers of the ancient times, and largely so of today. The former wholesaler is the Dwija and the former retailer the Shudra. The wholesaler and the priest have hitherto always combined in Indian history. Their political, economic, and social intimacy ... has turned them into the twice-born and the high-caste *par excellence* of modern Hindu society. And this most obvious fraud continues, which shows up caste as nothing but the congealing of money and status.

(Lohia 1964b, p. 99)

The “war” on caste waged by the Dwijas was merely verbal, according to Lohia while the “struggle” against caste by select Shudra groups who are in larger numbers, was an empty struggle mainly because it does not result in the shift of power to all the Shudras but to only a section among them. The “neo-Dwijas” assume some of the “trappings” of the Dwijas. Caste remains; it does not get destroyed. As Lohia explains: Among the Shudras, certain castes are numerically powerful, even overwhelming in some areas. The age of adult franchise has placed power in their hands. Some castes like Reddys and Mudaliars of South India and the Marathas of the west have made use of it. They and not the Dwijas, are the political overlords of their area, though even here the high caste has strengthened its economic grip and is making most clever and deceptive efforts to stage a political comeback. This is possible chiefly because these are empty struggles against caste. They do not change the social order in the sense of power to all the lower castes but only to the largest single section within them. They do not, therefore destroy caste but merely cause a shift in status and privileges. Some of the trappings of the high-caste belonging to the Brahmin or Vaishya are stripped of them and patched on the Maratha or the Reddy. This solves no problem. Rather, it disgusts all other lower castes and enrages the high castes. Caste with all its debility and some more of its irritation remains. (Lohia 1964b, pp. 99–100)

The Ahirs and Chamars of north India too tried similar methods but their efforts did not succeed like those of the Reddys and Marathas of south India because of two factors. One, the Dwija population in north India is much higher and two, because the Ahirs and Chamars are not quite so strong numerically among the lower castes in south India.

Similarly, introduction of a democratic system in the country and adult franchise-based elections resulted in some advantage to those castes that were larger in number. This “government by numbers” in a country where groups cohere through birth and long tradition, resulted in political parties wooing those castes for votes and choosing candidates from among them. This did result in some improvement in their status but the other lower castes, smaller in number individually but who together form the bulk of the population, remained stagnant. “A war on caste must necessarily mean an elevation of all, and not mercy of any one large section. A sectional elevation changes some relationships within the caste system but it leaves the basis of castes unaltered,” said Lohia (Lohia 1964b, p. 101).

This phenomenon of the elevation of a few castes and communities, due to political power or due to increased economic power, proved futile once again in loosening the hold of caste on the people. This was due to the assimilation of the few powerful castes into the existing high castes, adopting their ways, traditions, practices and even thinking. Some even began to wear

the sacred thread even as the Dwijas began to discard it. This process of “*Sanskritisization*” as it came to be known, further strengthened the high castes and the phenomenon of caste distance.

All this has an additional result of perpetuating the distinction (of caste). Furthermore, such a rise does not cause a general ferment among the lower castes. The risen are alienated from their groups ... This process of an extremely sectional and superficial rise, gives birth to another misfortune. The lever to the rise is supplied not by the cultivation of good qualities or talent but by the arousing of the bitter caste jealousies and the play of intrigues.

Lohia laid out different scenarios of negativities that could be a fall-out of the policy of elimination of caste if it was not implemented with care and caution.

**Scenario 1:** The Dwijas, who would naturally resist any change in their supremacy in society and in the government, might react much faster than the Shudras and try and discredit the policy thanks to their “undoubted alertness to developments and (their) capacity to mislead.”

**Scenario 2:** The more numerous among the lower castes, like the Chamars and Ahirs, may want to appropriate the fruits of this policy without sharing them with the myriad other low castes, resulting in the exchange of places by the Brahmins and the Chamars while caste remained intact.

**Scenario 3:** The policy may be misused by selfish men among the lower castes for their personal growth and might even use intrigue and promote caste jealousies that would further divide society instead of uniting it.

**Scenario 4:** Every single case of election or selection between Shudra and Dwija may result in acrimonious exchanges with the baser elements among the downgraded castes using it as a constant weapon. In trying to eliminate the immediate rival Dwija, they would seek to oust all Dwijas, and should they fail, then spread suspicions and foul the air.

**Scenario 5:** Economic and political issues may be relegated into the background and reactionaries among the lower castes may misuse the anti-caste policy to serve their own ends.

(Lohia 1964b, pp. 103–4)

Despite spelling out the above dire scenarios, Lohia believed that “continual awareness of this poison” might check it. Importantly, he cautioned against being paralyzed by the fear of the poison. Instead, one should be inspired by the “miraculous power of this policy to create and cure.” He predicted that should such a policy be implemented, India will experience “the most invigorating revolution of her history.”

In his words, Karl Marx tried to destroy class without being aware of its amazing capacity to change itself into caste, not necessarily the iron bound caste of India, but the immobile class anyway. For the first time, an experiment shall have been made in the simultaneous destruction of class and caste.

(Lohia 1964b, p. 104)

Lohia’s concept of socialism was not just addressing economic and social disparity; it was equally concerned with character building. Lohia’s ideal India was one that brought about both

social and individual reforms by striking the right balance between materialism and socialism. However, he was of the strong belief that India would not be able to achieve any social or economic equality unless social evils including discrimination the basis of gender, caste, religion and language were not eliminated (QRIUS 2017).

An important achievement of the period 1957–1962 was that the Socialist Party, under the leadership of Lohia, gave a concrete shape to socialism converting the abstract into concrete the party's programs and these included issues such as the abolition of caste, fixation of prices, removal of English, man–woman equality, four-pillar state, Indo-Pak unity and so on. For the abolition of caste, the party gave the slogan, in Hindi, “*Pichhde pavve sau mein saath*” that is, the backward people should get 60 percent reservation. The backward people for Lohia included the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Backward Castes (including the backward castes among Muslims) and women of all castes. Preferential opportunities meant that irrespective of qualifications and “merit” those the backward castes, women of all castes, and Dalits should be given jobs in the various branches of the government since that would open up opportunities to those who had been denied such opportunities for eons. The principal objective of the reservations was to achieve equality among unequals by giving special, preferential opportunities to the four groups he identified. Unless one got an opportunity to prove, to learn and to improve, how would a backward caste become equal?

In this own party, the Samyukta (United) Socialist Party, Lohia promoted 50 lower caste candidates both by giving them electoral tickets and high party positions. He was of the view that every single Indian should have a stake in making the country strong and unless every single Indian was involved in this fight it would not succeed. Importantly, Lohia asserted if democracy and socialism were to function properly in the country, then it was necessary to abolish the caste system. Lohia launched a crusade against the caste system on both social and political aspects in order to rouse the sentiments of the masses and involve them in the crusade. Lohia believed that the evils of the caste system had to be exposed constantly because the “most important single reality of the Indian institutions” will not go away by merely wishing it away.

Lohia believed that two practices, “*Roti and Beti*” would have to be adopted to break caste barriers: People belonging to different castes should eat (*roti*) together and marry their daughters to men from other castes. In short, inter-dining and inter-caste marriages would go a long way in eliminating caste. To fight caste politically, Lohia recommended social activities such as collective feasting, participation in dramas, fairs and games might serve as media of cultural interaction, exchange and diffusion. These ideas were proposed and adopted by the Samyukta Socialist Party of Lohia.

The conference “End Caste Conference” held in Patna, on 31 March–2 April, 1961, passed four resolutions for the annihilation of caste in India: These were:

1. **Mixed dinner:** The Conference appealed to the people of India and its party units to organize mixed dinner parties everywhere in the country, especially in villages.
2. **Inter-caste marriage:** The Conference was of the opinion that the caste system can be destroyed only when inter-caste marriages became common. To propagate these ideas discussions, plays and fairs should be organized. The enforcement of inter-caste marriages by government would not suffice. The Conference was clear that here inter-caste marriage would mean the marriage between Dvija and Shudras or Syeds and Jula has, and not between different subcastes among high castes.
3. **Adopt caste-neutral titles (surnames):** The Conference suggested that titles or surnames affixed to names should be evolved in such a way that it does not indicate the caste of a person.

4. **Special opportunities for the oppressed:** The Conference also passed a resolution for granting special opportunities to those who have been oppressed for thousands of years. The resolution read, “Whether able or not, Women, Shudras, Harijans, Backward Castes, Adivasis, and Muslims like weavers will have to be given 60 percent reservation” (Lohia 1964b).

The Conference agreed that in addition to religious, social, and economic programs to be adopted, a political program too was necessary to eradicate the caste system. The landless lower castes would have to be provided with land for cultivation and housing through redistribution of land.

Lohia knew the repercussions that struggle against caste would be severe, as any fight against the status quo. Any struggle against caste would inevitably mean going against religion, politics and business which together “conspired to preserve the slime that goes by the name of culture.” He warned that such was this conspiracy of the status quo that it had power in it to “spell infamy and death” for anyone who fought against it. “When young men and women suffer infamy for their honesty (in trying to destroy status quo), let them remember that this is the price they have to pay for clearing away the slime so that the waters may flow freely again,” the waters of equality, justice, freedom, of vitality and creativity. Encouraging the youth to take the lead in this fight, Lohia said “There is no greater virtue today than to smash these abominable segregations of caste and sex” (Lohia 1964b, p. 9).

Undoubtedly, Lohia was one of the original thinkers of India who was guided by humanism and compassion, of which he had plenty. He was also forthright and hard-hitting, not sparing anyone, including the highest in the country, if he found them wanting in principles or practiced double standards. He had strength of conviction in his prescriptions for ridding the society of its ills perpetuated by inequalities in every sphere of life. The kind of insights he had into the issues of injustice of caste and gender (apart from others) was possible only for someone who had utmost empathy for the underprivileged and one who was deeply affected by the suffering and deprivation of the masses. He was an uncompromising radical of his day whose heart beat for every victim of inequality and injustice.

Lohia believed that the two segregations of caste and gender had robbed the nation of its spirit and vitality. Importantly, these two segregations of caste and sex were inter-related and sustained each other. These segregations put out all spark of life and do not allow “vital juices (to) flow freely” (Lohia 1953, p. 365).

### **Lohia and equality for women**

Lohia was one of the early supporters of equality for women of all castes and saw all women as oppressed, not just women of the lower or oppressed castes. He admitted that the latter were doubly disadvantaged, both by their gender and their caste status. He showed remarkable understanding of the sufferings of women in the patriarchy- and caste-dominated systems that had turned women into a voiceless, unseen, unheard mass, deprived of agency and rendered powerless.

Lohia was as much against the unequal relations between the men and women as he was against the unequal relations between different castes. He spelled out the need for Seven Revolutions or changes in the Indian society if it was to develop into a humane, equal and just society. The first of these Seven Revolutions was to bring about equality between man and woman. Such was the importance given by Lohia to destroying the inequality between men and women. In his words, “Of all injustices plaguing the earth, those arising out of the inequality

between the sexes are perhaps the bedrock. Inequality between man and woman has so become part of human habit and nature that it seeps into everything else.”

The other revolutions that he propagated were: 1) Against inequalities based on color of the skin; 2) Against inequalities of caste; 3) Against foreign slavery and for a world people’s government; 4) Against inequalities of private capital and for planned development; 5) Against unjust intervention in personal life; and 6) Against armament and for satyagraha.

Lohia spoke against a whole range of issues that kept women suppressed, deprived of education, property rights and individuality. His empathy for women gave him insights into their restricted world. He spoke against child marriage and the cruelty practiced against child widows. He was against dowry, arranged marriage, against the concept of virginity and he questioned the legitimacy of the concept of “illegitimacy” of children born out of wedlock.

As an advocate of women’s participation in active politics, especially in socialist parties as members, leaders and party functionaries, Lohia specifically chose and promoted women and lower caste candidates by appointing them to high positions in the party and also putting them up as candidates in elections after he launched the Socialist Party in 1952. For instance, he fielded Sukho Rani, a sweeper woman, against the Queen of Gwalior. Rani lost but Lohia believed the very act of contesting was empowering since it gave self-confidence to those who were prevented from asserting themselves by caste and gender exclusions. Besides, the candidate got the opportunity to meet people and establish rapport with them, and in the process, discover herself (Kapoor 2010b).

Lohia faced much criticism, especially for espousing the cause of women. He was not deterred though. He advocated permanent reservation in jobs for women because they had been rendered weak by suppression for thousands of years. He strongly felt that women’s participation in politics was advantageous to society in many ways and said that they should be given posts of responsibility in political parties irrespective of experience or education.

He believed that the only way women could be free of male domination was by giving them preferential opportunities. As he said:

Certain disadvantages of earlier and bodily strength apply to women and the crust of centuries-old customs reduces her to the second sex. Giving her equal opportunity would not solve the problem of inequality between the sexes. When a group of people is held down by debility, physical or cultural, the only way to bring it up to equality with others is through conferment of preferential opportunities.

(*Lohia 1963, p. XXXIII3*)

Lohia argued that without waging a war on segregation of caste and gender, all war on poverty would be a sham. Mere political independence made no difference to the oppressed and exploited people. Social reform was therefore essential to banish social tyranny. In terms of facilitating equality for women, Lohia said it was not enough to give them equal opportunity. He made it clear that he was suggesting 60 percent of all appointments in administration, judiciary, military and industry be reserved for women, Shudras, Dalits, Adivasis and backward Muslims and Christians, not as a measure of selfish advancement but as a measure of “national security and advancement” (Lohia 1964b, p. 122).

Lohia specifically addressed the “two segregations of caste and sex” that were prevalent across the Indian society and were the worst forms of discrimination. He recognized women as among the most exploited and oppressed people across the world.

I am convinced that two segregations of caste and woman are primarily responsible for the decline of the spirit (of India). These segregations have enough power to kill all

capacity for adventure and joy. All those who think that, with the removal of poverty through a modern economy, these segregations will automatically disappear make a big mistake. Poverty and these two segregations thrive on each other's worms. All war on poverty is a sham, unless it is, at the same time, a conscious and sustained war on these two segregations.

(*Lohia*)

To establish gender equality, Lohia wanted women to be given preferential opportunities, rather than equal opportunities, since equal treatment in an unequal society would only perpetuate existing inequalities. Lohia was far ahead of his time, advocating reservation for women that came to be realized in the panchayati raj system several decades later. However, reservation for women in parliament and state assemblies has not yet been realized due to opposition from the male-dominated political leadership of almost all the political parties of all ideologies.

### **Women's status an indicator of the moral wellbeing of the nation**

Lohia believed that only by harnessing the energy and capability of women could the country flourish, especially those of the lower caste women. The status of women especially those of the Depressed Classes was a barometer to moral wellbeing of the nation, according to Lohia. He believed that greater women's representation would minimize political violence. He, however, believed that there was marginal difference in the social status of women across the castes, from upper to the lowest. Therefore, he was for considering all women including those of upper castes as disadvantaged and qualifying for preferential treatment. Lohia wanted to root out inequalities and social evils embedded in the social order. He identified caste and gender as two inequalities that needed to be destroyed if India were to grow into a healthy and democratic society and ultimately attain nationhood through the unity of its people across religious, regional, caste and gender lines. According to Lohia, the emancipation of women was the foundation of social revolution.

Lohia had unusual insights into a woman's social standing which led him to identify four major problems of the Indian women that needed to be addressed. These are: 1) The slavery of the kitchen and the stove that smokes horribly. 2) The hypocrisy attached to sex and marriage, including dowry, birth control and motherhood. 3) The need for greater equality between the two sexes in all spheres of life. 4) Opportunities in terms of political leadership and in government jobs (Gupta 2015).

### **Women's participation in movements and politics as the road to empowerment**

Lohia wanted women to take an active part in the civil disobedience and other movements because he believed that the active participation of women was ultimately responsible for the health of the race and the growth of the new generation. The woman, he said, is a more committed agent of civil resistance than her male counterpart. Women's participation in the civil disobedience movement would help to eschew violence. With groups of women in the ranks of civil resisters, Lohia observed, the possibility of its degeneration into street-fighting or violence would be greatly minimized. To him, the woman is a truer agent of civil resistance than the man. However, the politics of the day did not encourage the participation of women. In his words, "All politics in the country, Congress, Communist or Socialist, has one big area of national agreement, whether by design or through custom, and that is to keep down and disenfranchise

the Shudra and the woman who constitute over three-fourths of our entire population" (Lohia 1964c, p. 366).

Lohia believed that dignity and freedom for women were of utmost importance if their potential was to be harnessed for the overall welfare of society and the nation. Regarding the inequality between man and woman, Lohia believed that if women remained backward, illiterate and confined to the home, then the nation could not develop and prosper. He was all for the eradication of illiteracy and superstition, that had been ingrained in women for generations. He wanted them to broaden their horizon by participating in the struggles of civil society. He was sure that once women began to experience the external world, they would revolt against the subjugation they were subjected to. If political education was imparted to women, in terms of giving them positions and responsibilities in a political party or a forum, then they would become a formidable force to reckon with. Such experience and awareness would make them resist the deprivation, exploitation and subjugation they were subjected to by the patriarchal system.

Lohia wanted to make women aware of their importance to society. Emphasizing the need for and importance of women in building a healthy society, Lohia noted:

A Socialist movement without the active participation of women is like a wedding without the bride. Not only are women ultimately responsible for the health of the race and the growth of the new generation; they are also the chief support of a movement for peaceful resistance.

(Jadhav 1977)

Lohia keenly wanted the involvement of women in the freedom struggle and in the formation of a clean, classless, corruption-free and healthy nation after India attained independence.

He was moved by the daily suffering women faced in fetching water and fuel from long distances and by the fact that they had to wait until dark to be able to ease themselves in the open. He thought poorly of a culture that dictated that women should eat after everybody else did, and be content with the leftovers. This practice led to hunger among women with eight out of 11 women going hungry, he argued. The suffering was worse for women from poor families where food is always scarce. Whenever Lohia was invited for a meal by his followers or admirers in their home, he always insisted that the women should eat with them. Sometimes, he would even check out the kitchen to see if there was enough food for the family (Singh 2019).

### **Youth should revolt against customs and traditions that harm women**

He was totally against the dowry system and female infanticide. He believed that the responsibility of the parents ended with giving them good health and education and that they should not be concerned about getting them married as is the norm in India. He had strong words of criticism for dowry which he considered a "perverted" practice. He rued the fact that a girl without dowry had no value in the society "like a cow without her calf." Regarding marriage, Lohia supported the rights of divorce and remarriage for women. He wanted birth control facilities to be available to women both before and after their marriage. "I believe that every couple who have produced three children should be sterilized and that facilities of sterilization, or at least birth control, should be made available to every man or woman, married or unmarried, who does not wish to risk pregnancy" (Lohia 1964b).

He was against unnecessary expenditure incurred in marriages in terms of extravagant ceremonies, showy invitation cards and so on as they not only financially overburdened the parents

of the bride but, in turn, led to male preference and female infanticide by those who could not afford such expense.

Calling the youth to revolt against customs and traditions that created segregations of caste and gender, Lohia said there was no greater virtue than to “smash these abominable segregations of caste and sex.” He however asked them, in the process of “smashing” the segregations, they should not “cause hurt or pain or be coarse, for the relationship between man and woman is of delicate texture. They may not always be able to avoid it. But the striving should never cease.” By destroying caste and gender inequalities, Lohia believed that the “black sadness” that had engulfed the Indian society, would be dispelled. Having done their duty, the youth could then “adventure into joy.”

However, while revolting against “such puerilities” as the concept of virginity, the youth should ever remember that there are “only two unpardonable crimes in the code of sexual conduct, (namely) rape and the telling of lies or breach of promise. There is also a third offence of causing pain or hurt to another, which they should avoid as far as possible” (Lohia 1964b, p. 8). A true follower of Gandhi, Lohia did not want to cause pain or hurt to anyone in the process of opposing a social taboo.

Lohia believed that freedom was essential for the liberation and empowerment of woman in society. He supported full autonomy for women and encouraged them to agitate for their rights. On the issues of hypocrisy over sex, marriage and problems of motherhood, Lohia argued that both men and women should have the right to their sexual needs and desires. Sexual ethics based on the bondage of women caused all kinds of perversion whereas a frank, free and clear approach to sex can engender healthy ethics. He believed it to be wrong to think of the woman as merely a machine for producing children. He was all for freedom in sexual relationships. “If a girl knocks around and elopes and mischances into illegitimacy, that is, all part of the bargain to achieve normal relationships between man and woman and no stain at all” (Lohia 1964b, p. 368).

To him, just one illegitimate child was more decent than half-a-dozen legitimate children. Women should have same liberty in sexual matters as men have. Abortion should be permitted in an overpopulated country. Sterilization should take place after three children and facilities of sterilization, or at least birth control, should be made available to every man and woman, married or unmarried, who does not wish to risk pregnancy. He called for greater freedom for both men and women within marriage and he encouraged the youth to break caste and class barriers. Lohia perhaps is the first Indian in the modern era to envision this kind of freedom for women. He seemed to revel in rebellion especially against conservative and traditional norms and behavior. For Lohia, there was no limit in the freedom that women should have.

Lohia had huge reserves of empathy, which makes him the foremost champion of the poor, the oppressed, the minorities, and women. He spoke of the plight of widows who suffered humiliation, lower social status and deprivation. However, regarding the stigma attached to widowhood among the backward castes, he said was not as ruthless as among the higher castes. He spoke of the plight of the single women, and the low status they had in the family and in a society that believed that there was no meaning to a woman’s life if she did not marry. No suffering of a fellow being escaped Lohia’s notice.

Lohia recognized the “tyranny of skin color” and Indian society’s obsession with fair skin. Equating beauty with fair skin was discriminatory and caused women with a darker complexion immense suffering in terms of social stigma, neglect and ill-treatment within the family. He criticized the market for reinforcing this “tyranny” by selling soaps, creams, lotions and other cosmetic products which promised fairer skin.

Lohia voiced his concern over the fate of the dark-skinned women because they suffered greater oppression.

The dark women, who are more numerous, are reared on a diet of anxiety and inferiority. Even as a little child, the dark girl, who may be sister to a fairer girl in the same family, has to get accustomed to neglect and treatment reserved for citizens of second grade. The female child suffers lack of opportunities for growth in comparison to the male child, and on top of that if she happens to be dark, she experiences additionally shame and being relegated to an inferior position.

(*Lohia 1964a, pp. 127–128*)

Lohia attributed the obsession of Indians for fair skin to the colonization by white-skinned imperialists. If African nations had ruled the world, standards of female beauty would undoubtedly have been different, he argued (Singh 2019).

### **Financial independence and preferential opportunities for women**

To Lohia, the most important issue was women's dignity, and he considered their financial independence as central to their dignity. He said that their economic dependence on men greatly contributed to their slavery. He wanted preferential opportunities to be given to women since "giving her equal opportunity would not solve the problem of inequality between the sexes. When a group of people is held down by debility, physical or cultural, the only way to bring it up to equality with others is through conferment of preferential opportunities," he said. This was equally true of the lower castes and he wanted "preferential opportunities" to be given to these two groups of people. Lohia believed that the fight against societal inequalities would yield fruit if 60 percent reservation is given to women, lower castes, Dalits and Adivasis in administration, judiciary, military and industry.

Lohia differed with B. R. Ambedkar, the author of the Hindu Code Bill that was being discussed by the Indian Parliament in the 1950s, to bring about uniformity and to modernize Hindu personal laws. Among other issues, the Hindu Code Bill gave property and inheritance rights to daughters and widows and introduced the right to divorce. He implicitly criticized the Hindu Code Bill for ignoring the plight of women of the Shudra and other lower castes.

Women must be given equal rights with men. Really speaking, they must even get more if equality is to be obtained ... (but) these laws are not relevant for more than 80 per cent of India's women ... They have a meaning only for a few high-caste women in Brahmin, Bania, and Thakur homes ... the act was good but incomplete and initiated by twice-born self-interest ... the problem of the majority of Indian women is the lack of water taps and latrines.

(*Lohia 1964b*)

He wanted the patriarchal mindset, that could afflict both men and women, to be systematically destroyed. He recognized women as not mere creatures of beauty or as procreators but as productive beings, not just in their home but outside too. Lohia marked out the road for the empowerment of women. Freedom was the first and foremost criterion for the empowerment and uplifting of women.

He also reassured men that empowering women was not a threat to them but it was essential for improving the family, society and, in fact, the entire world. No country could move forward and prosper if women's talent, abilities and strengths were not mobilized. He believed that women were builders of the nation and a peaceful world. Women should be made aware and realize at every step of their life that they were important for the wellbeing of the entire world.

Thus, in 1953, he postulated that since the segregation on caste basis and enslavement of women are two actions that take place simultaneously, they have roots in the same ideological perspective. Therefore, any movement to eliminate caste discrimination should invariably raise its voice against gender discrimination as well. Thus, his explanation of the Indian society points to an inter-sectional approach for understanding the inequalities, exclusions and exploitations in Indian society, and establishes the interconnectivity and inter-sectionality of caste, class, gender and language. Interestingly, he said that the wife of a rich man could not be counted among the rich; similarly, women of upper castes were equivalent to Shudras in their social status. Hence, women as a category of oppressed people, should include not just women of the lower castes and class but all women, of higher castes and upper class too as women in these groups are also oppressed in the gender and class hierarchies. According to him, the emancipation of women was the foundation of social revolution, without it there can be no prosperity.

### **Free women means free nation**

Lohia believed that of all injustices plaguing the earth, the foremost are those arising out of inequality between the sexes. While most of humanity suffers from one inequality, one half of it, namely women, is weighed down with many injustices flowing from gender inequality.

Lohia believed that true independence would be achieved by India when its society overcame gender inequality and destroyed the cultural barriers of caste and class. Apart from wanting to achieve a society that was free of inequalities, injustice and exploitation, Lohia also spoke about the collective wellbeing and happiness in a society. A happy society was one which would enable every individual to bloom and achieve her full potential. His vision for struggle and ultimate success encompassed all areas such as social, economic, political, cultural, that had contributed to a skewed society and unequal social systems. His ideal was to bring about a society that was democratic, equal, just and free of exploitation. Only such a society would be truly happy. Lohia defined not just socialism but happiness too.

Lohia was keen to build an India that respected a humane approach to build a society where social justice prevailed, women were empowered, the differentiation of caste was removed and equality prevailed in terms of rights, opportunities and political and economic participation. His worldview was one in which oneness prevailed and there was no differentiation between the people in any respect.

### **Notes**

- 1 A 12th century Rajput ruler who is said to have helped a foreign army to attack and defeat his rival and king of neighboring Prithviraj Chauhan and thus the name Jaichand became synonymous with "traitor."
- 2 A ruler of Bengal in the 18th century who is said to have helped the British East India Company to establish its sovereignty in eastern India and whose name is now taken to mean a puppet or a traitor.

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*Lohia's thought for empowering people*

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## PART II

# Backward class movements

Caste-oppressed people have been fighting for social justice, identity and greater participation in the affairs of the state and in the political processes for several decades now. They have met with limited success given the dominance of the caste-privileged in every institution of the country, from politics to administration, to judiciary to media. As this section shows, the assertion of the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) has been across the country, from the southern states of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and the two Telugu states to the northern states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar to the western state of Gujarat and the eastern state of West Bengal. While the movements have had limited success, there is a new-found assertion and sense of confidence among the OBCs.

One of the most significant movements in post-independence India was the Mandal movement which changed the political discourse, transforming Indian politics. In the previous century major movements were seen in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka against the domination of Brahmins in all spheres of life, especially in the colonial government in the former Madras Presidency. A major contributor to these early movements was the starting of caste associations which mobilized people to assert their rights. This awakening was tapped into by Periyar by his Self-Respect Movement which changed the course of history in Tamil Nadu. In the two Telugu states of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh, the people were awakened by the anti-feudal movement of the communists and caste associations. In Maharashtra the legacy of the Phule-Ambedkarite movements of the Shudras and Dalits gave rise to movements for livelihood, dignity and rights by the oppressed people.

However, a weakness of the movements of the OBCs across India has been their inability to forge inter-caste unity for their common goal of empowerment and social justice. Similarly, the rise of the Upper Shudras across the country as they came into economic prosperity through their agricultural landholdings, turned them into neo-upper castes in terms of prejudice, hatred and exploitation. This is true in most states. The political system has taken advantage of the inter-caste rivalry to co-opt the rebels and put down the movements. Two factors now threaten the gains made by the OBCs in terms of reservation: 1) The increasing withdrawal of the state from people's welfare and the rising liberalization of economy and privatization, leading the OBCs to demand reservation in the private sector, and 2) The coming into political power of the right wing which is against reservation for OBCs.



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# 10

## OBCs AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

*M. N. Rao*

The topic concerning the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) is a multi-dimensional one; to understand its many facets, a sound knowledge of history, sociology, political science, religion and law is essential. Scholars associated with these disciplines are the most competent to contribute to proper understanding and critical appreciation of the issues concerning the OBCs.

In the Indian context, class being also a caste, the issues concerning OBCs spring from the Hindu caste system. So much has been written about this by scholars of eminence and historians, consensus among them being that it is a cruel social system, hard-hearted and baneful that could possibly be invented for demeaning the human race. It is not necessary to add anything further to this except to quote Sir Henry Maine, British jurist, historian and anthropologist, and the celebrated author of *Ancient Law* of 1861. According to him, the caste system is the “most disastrous and blighting of all human institutions” (Maine 1905).

Writers on Dharma Shastras held the view that the four Hindu castes also called *varnas*—Brahman, Kshatriya, Vysya and Shudra are arranged in descending scale of social status and governed by a rigid code. The function assigned to the Brahmin was custody of knowledge and learning. The Kshatriya’s function was fighting and that of the Vysya was trade. The Shudra was placed at the lowest in the social order and was assigned menial work. Outside the four-fold division, the other class of people known as *Chandalas* suffered the harshest form of social disability *viz.*, untouchability, treated as less than human beings and condemned to live outside the villages.

The caste of the person is the one in which s/he is born. The legal system too was structured in such a way that different punishments were prescribed for people belonging to different castes. Divine sanction was accorded to the Hindu caste structure: *Bhagavad Gita* being the highest authority in the Hindu religion, sanctified the system. The impossibility of Hindu social structure evolving itself into a nation as long as caste system was permitted to survive was graphically described by the celebrated British author J. Murray Mitchel in his work *Hinduism: Past and Present*:

One becomes sick at heart when he thinks of what caste has done and is doing. Even politically, it is a curse. It goes on multiplying divisions; men of the same caste, if from different localities, will not eat with each other. Society splits and splits. All feeling of

brotherhood is destroyed, that of nationality is also destroyed, and if the Hindus are ever to become one nation, they must first cast off Hinduism.

(Mitchell 2000)

The characteristics of the Indian caste system are a) hereditary, i.e., every person is assigned to a particular caste by birth; b) endogamy and exogamy, i.e., restrictions with regard to marriage, food and occupation; and c) gradation of caste, i.e., some castes are at the top of the social hierarchy. In Dr Ambedkar's words, "The Hindu society is a house of castes. They are the aggregates of groups of people formed into castes. This is its peculiarity" (Ministry of External Affairs 1989).

The lower castes were deprived of all forms of social, political, cultural and economic freedom and all avenues for upward mobility in the caste hierarchy were closed to them. A reformist religion like Buddhism which gave hope for recognition of human equality and dignity in social relations could not survive for long in India. Hinduism has assimilated Buddhism, practically causing its disappearance from the country of its birth, but made Buddha an incarnation of God. Buddha is treated as the ninth incarnation by the Hindus.

After the Muslim conquest, Islam became the religion of the State. As Islam is founded on the doctrine of social equality, it attracted large number of Hindus especially from the lower castes and outcastes. Even after their conversion into Islam, the erstwhile Shudras and Dalits could not escape the evil effects of the caste system, namely, the tyranny of social inequality and untouchability. Among the Muslims, those of Iranian and Arab descent as well as upper-caste Hindu converts occupied the highest position in the social hierarchy, and they are known as *Ashraf*. Shudras who chiefly consisted of artisans, on conversion, occupied the second position going by the name *Ajlaf* while the former untouchables, on conversion, occupied the lowest social position among the Muslims and they are called *Ajral*.

The position in Christianity is no better. After the advent of British rule, many communities, high and low among Hindus, embraced Christianity. Upper-caste Hindu converts enjoyed the benefits of lucrative jobs and important positions while the lower-caste converts (Shudras and outcastes) could not escape the tyranny of the caste system and the social disability they suffered under Hinduism. Among the officially listed backward classes, there are many Christian classes identified with reference to their caste. The same is the case with regard to Muslims.

The plight of Hindu women was deplorable, especially those belonging to Shudras and Dalits. Jyotirao Phule was the first social reformer who espoused the cause of Hindu women, especially the Shudra women. He propagated vigorously Hindu widow remarriages, established a school for girls of all castes and founded in 1873 the Satyashodak Samaj or Society of the Seekers of Truth, in Pune.

After the advent of the British rule, liberal ideas prevailing in European countries found their way into India. In 1828, Raja Ram Mohan Roy founded the Brahmo Samaj and openly fought against the caste system. Justice M. G. Ranade was another social reformer of the 19th century, who inspired by the British liberal values, championed the cause of Indian women and questioned the injunctions imposed by the Hindu orthodoxy. He led a movement against child marriages, compulsory celibacy by widows, dowry system, polygamy, untouchability, caste restrictions against inter-dining and inter-caste marriages and denial of education to women. Both Ranade and Phule admired the British liberal ideas and supported British rule over India. In the case of Ranade, the reason he gave for supporting British rule is thus: "It is not as the representative of a brute force but of the order and genius of equal law that we bow down to this supreme necessity" (Jagirdar 1963). Jotirao Phule's perception was different. He proclaimed openly that Indian society was not ripe for independence from British rule. No social good would result if the white rulers were replaced by black autocrats. The necessary condition for

becoming independent was social transformation which, of course, did not take place during his lifetime. Besides Ranade and Phule, the other great social reformers were Narayan Guru of Kerala, Chatrapathi Sahuji Maharaj of Kollapur (in Maharashtra) and Periyar E.V. Ramaswamy in Tamil Nadu.

In the 20th century, the tallest amongst the social reformers was Dr B. R. Ambedkar. He clashed with Gandhiji on many important aspects of social reform especially the upliftment of the untouchables. Even Gandhiji believed that the Karma theory was linked with caste system. Gandhi expressed his views on the caste system thus:

In accepting the four-fold division, I am simply accepting the laws of nature, taking for granted what is inherent in human nature, and the law of heredity. We are born with some of the traits of our parents. The fact that a human being is born only in the human species shows that some characteristics, i.e., caste, are determined by birth.

*(Government of India 1968)*

Dr Ambedkar recognized that the problem of Dalits was not a social problem unconnected with politics and he believed that the emancipation of Dalits would come only from political empowerment. He said:

we hold that the problem of the Depressed Classes will never be solved unless they get political power in their hands ... The settlement of our problem must be a part of the general political settlement and must not be left to the shifting stands of the sympathy and goodwill of the rulers of the future ... the best guarantee for the settlement of our problem is the adjustment of the political machine itself so as to give us a hold on it, and not the will of those who are contriving to be left in unfettered control of that machine.

*(Ministry of External Affairs 1982)*

It is a matter of history as to how Dr Ambedkar highlighted the problem of the Depressed Classes and fought for separate electorates for them and almost succeeded in doing so. It was Gandhiji's fast unto death that averted the Depressed Classes being listed as a separate electorate. The demand of Dr Ambedkar for separate electorates for Dalits was acceded to by the British Prime Minister Ramsay McDonald who announced on August 13, 1932, what was popularly known as the Communal Award providing for a separate electorate for the Depressed Classes. However, the Poona Pact, the agreement between Dr Ambedkar and Gandhiji which was signed on September 24, 1932, at the Yerwada Central Jail where Gandhiji was confined, did away with the separate electorates but to a large extent it secured special rights to the Depressed Classes.

After the advent of independence, the Constituent Assembly after a great deal of discussion did not agree for continuation of separate electorates for the minorities but retained reservations for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes both in public offices as well as elected bodies of the state legislatures and Union Parliament.

The concept of justice is a comprehensive one: It includes social, economic and political justice. From a narrow point of view, legal justice deals with rights of the State to define crimes and prescribe punishments. On the other hand, social justice is concerned with distribution of benefits and burdens throughout society, entitling every member of society to enjoy the same level of wellbeing as others. Social justice implies equal opportunities for all without discrimination or disabilities of any kind. Unequal capacities which are the consequences of social and economic inequalities should not impede or prevent people from availing of opportunities for their

wellbeing. The realization of social justice compels alteration of the basic structure of the society by ushering in a new legal order to harmonize the conflicting interests of different sections. In the Indian context, social justice assumes new significance because of the Hindu caste system. The preamble of our constitution incorporates among other things, justice, social economic and political. Our constitution makers firmly believed that social justice could be possible only if there is a socialist economy. That is why even in 1946, when the Constituent Assembly met in the undivided India, a resolution was passed on November 20, 1946, declaring that social and economic justice would form the foundations of the constitution: The Constitution (42nd Amendment) Act, 1976 specifically included the words “social and secular” in the first sentence of the preamble.

The principles of social justice as embodied in our constitution are found in Parts III, IV, X, XVI, Schedules V and VI besides the preamble. Articles 14 to 16, incorporating the principles of equality, also emphasize affirmative action in Clause (4) of Article 15 and Clause (4) of Article 16. Article 19 confers six fundamental freedoms concerning speech, assembly, association, movement, residence and profession. (Article 19, as originally enacted, provided for a seventh freedom, the right to property, which was deleted by the Constitution (44th Amendment) Act, 1979.) Articles 23 and 24 relate to the right against exploitation and prohibition of forced labor and employment of children in factories. Articles 5 to 28 dwell on the right to freedom of religion, while Articles 29 and 30 envisage protection of the rights and interests of minorities. In Part IV, Directive Principles, Articles 38 to 48 incorporate the principles of socio-economic transformation of society. Specific mention needs to be made of Article 46, which enjoins the State to promote the educational and economic interests of the Scheduled Castes, the Scheduled Tribes and the Other Backward Classes.

Article 16(4) provides for reservation in appointments or posts in favor of any backward class of citizens which in the opinion of the State is not adequately represented in the services under the State. As there was no specific mention with regard to other reservations like reservation in educational institutions, the judgment of the Supreme Court in Champakam Dorairajan's case striking down the Communal GO, issued by the Madras government led to the Constitution (First Amendment) Act, 1951 by which Clause (4) was introduced in Article 15 providing for reservation for the advancement of any socially and educationally backward class of citizens, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

The inclusion of the word “backward” which qualifies the expression “class” in Article 16(4) led to a lot of controversy in the Constituent Assembly. An important member like T. T. Krishnamachari felt that this was an afterthought for the purpose of applying the benefits to a large section of the community. Explaining why the word “backward” was used, Dr Ambedkar said in the Constituent Assembly:

If the honourable members understood this position that we have to safeguard two things namely, the principle of equality of opportunity and at the same time, satisfy the demand of communities which have not had, so far, representation in the State, then I am sure they will agree that unless you use some such qualifying phrase as ‘Backward’, the exception made in favour of reservation will ultimately eat up the rule altogether. Somebody asked me: ‘What is a backward community?’ Well, I think anyone who reads the language of the draft itself will find that we have left it to be determined by each local government. A backward community is a community which is backward in the opinion of the government.

(Anon 1948)

At the first sight, one may get the impression that it is the absolute discretion of the government to declare a community as a backward community. But in reality, it is not so. Article 340

which was part of the original constitution, envisaged the appointment of a commission by the President of India to investigate the conditions of socially and educationally backward classes for the purpose of making recommendations for improving their conditions and for releasing grants for their upliftment. Social and educational backwardness are the two prime requisites to be satisfied before a caste is declared as backward.

The first Backward Classes Commission was appointed by the Government of India under the chairmanship of Kakasaheb Kalelkar in 1953. It ended in a fiasco. After the report was submitted in 1955, the Chairman Kalelkar wrote in his forwarding letter that he was disillusioned with the entire concept of empowering the backward classes. The remedy which the commission suggested, according to him, was worse than the disease. The central government rejected the report on the ground that the commission had not applied any objective tests for identifying the backward classes. It was only 23 years later, in 1978, that the Government of India under the Prime Ministership of Morarji Desai appointed the Second Commission for Backward Classes headed by B. P. Mandal. The commission submitted its report on December 31, 1980.

Based upon the report of the Mandal Commission, the Government of India headed by V. P. Singh issued an order dated August 13, 1990, reserving 27 percent of posts in central services for the backward classes. By a subsequent order dated September 25, 1991, out of the 27 percent, a 10 percent sub-quota was earmarked for economically backward sections. The said reservation was subject matter of a Constitution Bench judgment of the Supreme Court in *Indra Sawhney vs Union of India* (AIR 1993 SC 477). Out of nine judges, six upheld the order but struck down the 10 percent quota in favor of economically backward classes. Justice B. P. Jeevan Reddy spoke for the judges constituting the majority. Justice Pandian, in his separate opinion, agreed with the majority but recorded his dissent on the question of excluding affluent sections among the backward classes for the benefits under Articles 15(4) and 16(4). It is relevant to note some of the observations in the majority judgment: The backwardness contemplated under Article 16(4) is mainly social backwardness which leads to educational and economic backwardness. If some members of any backward caste are far too advanced socially, they must be excluded. The economic advancement for such exclusion should be so high that it necessarily means social advancement. To qualify for a backward class, caste need not be similar to scheduled caste or scheduled tribe.

The judgment rejected the earlier view of the Supreme Court in *Balaji vs State of Mysore* that to qualify for a backward class, the degree of backwardness should be similar to that of a scheduled caste. The majority held: "Such a test would practically nullify the provision for reservation for socially and educationally backward classes other than scheduled castes or scheduled tribes."

The majority also held that there should be classification of backward classes depending upon the degree of backwardness, and the extent of reservation should be proportionate to the population of each class and that the outer limit of reservation should not exceed 50 percent. What is most significant is that the majority judgment said that the upper layer among the backward classes must be kept out of the protective umbrella of Articles 15(4) and 16(4). The test laid down by Justice Sawant which was not dissented to by the others is:

The correct criteria for judging the forwardness of the forwards among the backward classes is to measure their capacity not in terms of the capacity of others in their class, but in terms of the capacity of the members of the forward classes.

*(Mulchand 2008)*

By stating that the word "class" in Article 16(4) was used in the sense of a social class but not as understood in Marxist parlance, Justice Jeevan Reddy held:

Backward class of citizens in Article 16(4) takes in scheduled tribes, scheduled castes and all other backward classes of citizens including the socially and educationally backward classes (SEBCs). Thus, certain classes which may not qualify for Article 15(4) may qualify for Article 16(4). They may not qualify for Article 15(4) but they may qualify as backward class of citizens for the purposes of Article 16(4). It is equally relevant to notice that Article 340 does not expressly refer to services or to reservations in services under the State, though it may be that the Commission appointed there under may recommend reservation in appointments/posts in the services of the State as one of the steps for removing the difficulties under which SEBCs are labouring and for improving their conditions. Thus, SEBCs referred to in Article 340 is only one of the categories for whom Article 16(4) was enacted. Article 16(4) applies to a much larger class than the one contemplated by Article 340. It would, thus, be not correct to say that “backward class of citizens” in Article 16(4) are the same as the socially and educationally backward classes in Article 15(4). Saying so would mean and imply reading a limitation into a beneficial provision like Article 16(4). Moreover, when speaking of reservation in appointments/posts in the State services—which may mean at any level whatsoever—insisting upon educational backwardness may not be quite appropriate.

It is difficult to agree with this reasoning. If the members of a class could secure adequate representation in services they would cease to be educationally backward, and the advancement registered by them by securing adequate representation in the services should itself be a pointer to their social advancement and such a class would not be entitled to the benefits under Article 15(4) since it would cease to be a class afflicted by social and educational backwardness. That class would go out of the ambit of Article 15(4). If social backwardness is the predominant test for the benefits under Article 16(4), the aforesaid class which would not qualify for the benefits under Article 15(4) ipso facto would be disentitled to claim the benefit under Article 16(4) as a class suffering from social backwardness. It is well-nigh impossible to think of a class or a caste in this country which has advanced educationally and secured adequate representation in the services but is afflicted with social backwardness. It is, therefore, not possible to say that there can be a backward class under Article 16(4) which is not covered by Article 15(4). The contra view expressed by the majority needs reconsideration.

The annual income for exclusion of the benefits earlier was Rs4.5 lakhs. Recently that has been increased to Rs6 lakhs by the Government of India. The increase in this regard does not accord with the ground realities and the test laid down by the Supreme Court. The 27 percent reservation for OBCs had not reached the maximum limit especially in Group A and B Services. The annual report for 2009–2010 indicates that in A, B, C and D Groups of Central Services, the total percentage of OBCs is only 7 percent (Statistics at a glance, annual report 2009–10).

A basic anachronism that stares one in the eye as regards the position of OBCs under the constitution is found in Article 338(5) read with Clause (10) by which the National Commission for Scheduled Castes was vested with the power to look into the grievances, investigate the complaints and enquire into the safeguards provided for backward classes under the Constitution of India. In the beginning, the explanation given for this anachronism was that when the constitution was being drafted, there was no approved list of backward classes and, therefore, the duty of protecting their interests was entrusted to the National Commission for Scheduled Castes. The National Commission for Backward Classes is a creature of a statute; it has no constitutional position. Its powers are limited to inclusion of castes into the central list of backward classes and excluding the same if the circumstances so warrant. To date, no caste has been excluded from the lists.

The Constitution (73rd Amendment) Act and Constitution (74th Amendment) Act, 1992, popularly called the Rajiv Gandhi Acts had brought about a radical change with regard to the demand of the backward classes for reservation in political offices. The aforesaid amendments to the constitution enabled the states to make reservations in favor of backward class of citizens in panchayats and municipalities. In this regard, the judgment of the Supreme Court delivered in 2010 in Krishna Murthy vs Union of India which concerns reservations in local bodies in favor of backward classes, has struck a different note. According to the Supreme Court, the principles that have been evolved in relation to reservation of posts under Articles 15(4) and 16(4) cannot be readily applied in the context of local self-government. The identification of backward classes for the purpose of reservation in local bodies should be distinct from the identification of socially and educationally backward classes for the purpose of Articles 15(4) and 16(4A). A serious criticism has been leveled against the aforesaid view of the Supreme Court. It is said with justification that it is practically not possible to prepare a new list of backward classes exclusively for the purpose of political reservations. The term “backward class” must be understood in the context of what is laid down in Article 340(1) *viz.*, social and educational backwardness. There cannot be a backward class in this country which is free from social and educational backwardness.

The Constitution (93rd Amendment) Act which introduced Article 15(5) in the constitution has enabled the State to make special reservation for advancement of backward classes including Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) regarding admission to educational institutions whether aided or unaided by the State. The constitutionality of this amendment was upheld by the Supreme Court in 2008 (6) SCC 1. The Right to Education Act which mandated private unaided schools to admit to the extent of 25 percent children of weaker sections free of cost in the age group of 6–14 years was also upheld by the Supreme Court.

Universal adult franchise is guaranteed by Article 326 of the Constitution. According to the Mandal Commission Report, 52 percent of the country’s population belongs to backward classes. Besides this 52 percent, the SC and ST population together constitute 25 percent. Thus, more than 75 percent of the country’s population does not belong to the advanced sections. But paradoxically, political power always has been in the hands of the socially advanced and economically powerful sections. Is it because that there is no homogeneity among the backward classes so as to put up a united front for capturing power or is it because that they become willing prey to the allurements held out by the affluent upper castes? It is only in the recent past, giving a new twist to the social engineering, that a few powerful classes among the backward classes like the Yadav and Kurmi communities are able to capture power in states like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. In the (formerly undivided) State of Andhra Pradesh, not a single OBC has become Chief Minister despite the fact that 52 percent of the population is OBCs. The contemporary events speak for themselves.

Economic liberalism and socio-economic justice do not go together in our country because of the in-built social inequalities. The World Trade Organization (WTO) regime covers intellectual property rights as well as services. India being a signatory to the WTO Agreement it is under an obligation to restructure its legal system so as to accord with the WTO regime. (Article 16(4) of the WTO Agreement). The WTO Agreement founded upon economic liberalism—*laissez faire*—and the obligation of the Indian State to strive for social justice coupled with the directives contained in Articles 38 and 39 of the constitution are clearly irreconcilable.

Criticism is mounting in our country that globalization in the form of economic liberalism is resulting in acquisition of huge wealth by individuals and business houses without caring for the social and economic development of the marginalized and deprived sections of society. According to Amartya Sen, if the present trend continues, half of India would resem-

ble California while the other half would be reduced to the level of the sub-Saharan region (Mitra 2011).

Special economic zones (SEZs) have proved ineffective in providing employment. The farmers who were deprived of their livelihood because of the special economic zones will not get any benefit—not even 5 percent of them will be absorbed in the SEZs, according to the eminent author Ashok Mitra in the above-cited book. He further suggests that the top decile of Indian society that was experiencing unprecedented prosperity, would import more and more of consumption goods from overseas, thereby denying the poor the privilege of producing these goods domestically. The poor in the countryside would continue to starve and die (Mitra 2011).

The scope for public employment is shrinking at a fast pace. The State has begun to withdraw from economic activities leaving the field to the private sector. In the absence of reservation in the private sector, the lot of the backward classes will not improve. The question that crops up now is whether the State has got the power to implement a reservation policy in the private sector? The answer is definitely in the affirmative. If the business and industrial units were started with the financial aid of the government or public financial institutions, they could be compelled by law to abide by the policy of reservations.

How political expediency is assuming overall importance even in matters relating to justice to the OBCs is evident from the persistent efforts made by several state governments and the central government to include socially advanced, politically influential and economically strong communities in the list of OBCs in order to gain political advantage. Among the powerful communities making efforts for entry into the OBCs, mention may be made of Jats in northern India and Kapus in southern India. The oft-repeated criticism that votebank politics propel the functioning of every political party appears to be not untrue.

The Mandal Commission was appointed in 1980, more than three decades ago. It is a well-known fact that the Mandal Commission faced many difficulties in fulfilling the responsibility entrusted to it, chiefly because of absence of a caste census. The central government has taken a negative attitude not to agree for caste census—the reasons are difficult to discern. When the benefits of the State are intended for certain sections of society—the marginalized socially and educationally—unless those sections are identified, the very purpose of earmarking funds for their development gets defeated. It is rather intriguing that this primordial fact, although accepted by all politicians and political parties, but no efforts are made to go in for caste census, a necessary prerequisite for effectively dispensing social justice to the deserving classes.

In the context of the functioning of the Backward Classes Commissions, both at the State level and the union level, for the purpose of inclusion of deserving classes and exclusion of those which have attained sufficient degree of social advancement, what is astonishing to notice is the absence of even a single case of exclusion of any community from the existing lists. Even 70 years after the Constitution of India came into force and 73 years after the advent of independence, despite incurring huge expenditure for the advancement of marginalized sections, it is inexplicable as to how no single community could be identified as having achieved the degree of social advancement which disentitles it from remaining in the list of backward classes.

It is imperative for the Government of India to appoint a commission under Article 340 of the constitution to identify the socially and educationally backward classes for the purpose of enabling them to receive the benefits granted by the constitution, since the Mandal Commission's Report has practically become outdated.

Let us recall the famous statement of Prof. Dworkin:

no one in our society should suffer because he is a member of a group, thought less worthy of respect as a group than other groups. We have different aspects of that prin-

ciple in mind when we say that individuals should be judged on merit; they should be judged as individuals and they should not suffer disadvantages because of their race. In that fundamental principle is the spirit of the goal that affirmative action is intended to serve. The principle furnishes no support for those who find, as Bakke does, that their own interests conflict with that goal.\

(Dworkin 1985)

As far back as 1997 delivering the Dr Ambedkar Memorial Lecture as part of the Chancellor's Lecture Series at the Nagpur University, I expressed the view:

Social diversity must be reflected in the setup of all instrumentalities of the State and all institutions controlled or funded by the State. Real equality is possible only when past victims of social disabilities are able to claim on their own, higher positions, enjoying fair equality of opportunity without any demand for preferential treatment. For this the necessary precondition is social integration which, in turn, depends upon all social groups achieving more or less uniform development. The transience of affirmative action depends upon the duration of reaching this goal."The social climate has not changed: I still adhere to my views.

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# 11

## MANDAL, MANDAL COMMISSION AND MAKING OF AN OBC IDENTITY

*Arvind Kumar*

Ekalavya, a character in the Hindu classic Mahabharata, is a tribal prince who sacrifices his talent as an archer par excellence by fulfilling the wish of his Dronacharya, the teacher of the Pandava and Kaurava princes. He severs his thumb and hands it to Dronacharya in accordance with the wish of his “Guru” who actually does not want any competition to his favorite student and Pandava prince, Arjuna. The Guru who refused to teach Ekalavya as he was low caste, makes the unjust demand of “Guru Dakshina” or his fee since Ekalavya learns archery by secretly watching Dronacharya teach the princes. With his hand mutilated, Ekalavya can pose no challenge to Arjuna, who is the best student of Dronacharya. The marginalized people see this story as typical of their history of suppression, of being cheated and deprived of all opportunities of growth by the rich, upper caste and the privileged to protect their interests and hegemony.

### B. P. Mandal: A profile

Bindhyeshwari Prasad Mandal (henceforth, B. P. Mandal) was born on August 25, 1918,<sup>1</sup> in Varanasi in eastern Uttar Pradesh. His mother was Sitawati Mandal and father, Rasbihari Lal Mandal, who was a *zamindar* (landlord) of the Murho estate falling under the Madhepura subdivision of Bhagalpur district in north-eastern Bihar. The credit of spreading awareness among the vast masses of socially and educationally backward Shudras and making them politically aware in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in the Bhagalpur region goes undisputedly to Rasbihari Lal Mandal.

B. P. Mandal started his primary education at a local school at his native village, Murho, and later at Shirres<sup>2</sup> Institute (now renamed Shiv Nandan Prasad Mandal<sup>3</sup> High School) at Madhepura. He went on to do his higher secondary education at Raj High School, Darbhanga. It was during his stay at a hostel in Darbhanga that he was subjected to visible discrimination. Having come from a *zamindar* family he maintained the social status, yet for being born into a Shudra family, he was offered food along with other so-called lower-caste students only after the *savarna* students had finished their food. B. P. Mandal raised this issue with the school and hostel administration and ensured that this discriminatory treatment of students ended. Later he joined the prestigious Patna College, Patna, for his degree in English literature.

His father was not only a small *zamindar* but one of the founding members of the Indian National Congress and a noted social reformer. His social activism with Yadav Mahasabha<sup>4</sup> played an important role in restoring social dignity and self-confidence among the Shudra masses. He was also a philanthropist who donated a large tract of land for the construction of a subdivisional headquarters in the heart of Madhepura town. Seeing this, the District Magistrate and Subdivisional Officer wanted to seize another tract of land on the pretext of constructing a library by exerting undue administrative pressure. So much so, the then District Magistrate, F. F. Lyall, and the Subdivisional Officer, Shirres, made several allegations against Rasbihari Lal Mandal and dragged him to court. Lyall once observed:

I have myself read the appellate judgement of a Subordinate Judge in such a case which he has come to the clearest and strongest finding that Babu Rash Bihari Mandal had filed forged zamindari papers to support a claim to the illegal rate of rent he claimed: yet the plea of payment is dismissed with the remark that the defendant can file no receipt to prove it. This may be law but surely this is not justice.

(Byrne 2011)

But Rasbihari Lal Mandal showed exemplary courage and faced the court cases and made sure that he not only won the case against the colonial officers but also got his case transferred to Darbhanga from Bhagalpur based on the observation of the Calcutta High Court that the attitude of Mr Lyall towards Rasbihari Lal Mandal was indeed prejudiced.<sup>5</sup>

In 1922, the first son of Rasbihari Lal Mandal, Bhubneshwari Prasad Mandal was already a member of the Bihar Legislative Council who held this position until 1928. His second son, Kamleshwari Prasad Mandal, became a member of the same council in 1936. Another relative, Shivnandan Prasad Mandal, was the parliamentary secretary of Bihar before joining the cabinet of Shrikrishna Singh, becoming the first Law Minister of Bihar. Rasbihari Lal's family was so politically active that his third and youngest son B. P. Mandal became an unopposed member of Bhagalpur District Council in 1941 at the tender age of 23 (Srivastava 2002). From 1945 to 1951, he remained the judicial magistrate of Madhepura subdivision without any salary and finally resigned from this honorary position in protest against the bureaucratic attitude of the district magistrate. In 1952 came the first general elections of independent and republican India. Although Madhepura was one of the oldest subdivisions of the then Bhagalpur district since 1845, it was not a parliamentary seat until the third general elections which were held in 1962. In the first general elections for the State Assembly of Bihar, B. P. Mandal contested on a Congress ticket and defeated Bhupendra Narayan Mandal (henceforth, B. N. Mandal) representing the Socialist Party. B. P. Mandal was an active legislator and soon he created a niche for himself in the Assembly for his fearless and uncompromising interventions in Assembly debates. Impressed by his performance, the first Chief Minister offered him important assignments but B. P. Mandal was not keen on anything less than an independent ministry.

### **Legacy of self-respect**

B. P. Mandal was born into a family of a social reformers and was an heir to a legacy of self-respect. The Mandal family's village, Murho, and the area around Madhepura were backward in terms of social, educational and economic development but these areas had maintained their links with heterodox sects from ancient times and with the Bhakti tradition of medieval times. Buddhism had a strong influence on *Kabir-panthis* during medieval times.<sup>6</sup> During colonial rule, the region's proximity to Calcutta brought it under the influence of the social reform move-

ment in general and Bengal Renaissance in particular. For the first time in modern times, it was Rasbihari Lal Mandal who fought against social ills and the orthodox ways and beliefs that were widely prevalent. Rasbihari was born into a family of small *zamindar* Raghbir Dayal Mandal. Rasbihari Lal conducted programs of social reforms at the village level (Srivastava 2002), along with Surendranath Das, belonging to a Brahmo Samaj family. The programs included opposition to caste and communal hatred, the caste system, untouchability, sati, child marriage, imprudent spending, taking loans, illiteracy, alcoholism, gambling and so on.

In this atmosphere of reform and opposition to regressive social practices and traditions, B. P. Mandal imbued a strong sense of dignity and self-respect. When, during a discussion in the Assembly, a member belonging to upper caste used the word “*gwala*” as a derogatory reference to the Yadava community B. P. Mandal protested strongly and the then speaker of the Bihar Assembly, V. P. Verma issued a notice stating that “use of the word *gwala* was unparliamentary.”<sup>7</sup> In 1972, when Kedar Pandey was the Chief Minister of Bihar, the establishment of Mithila University was being proposed. B. P. Mandal opposed the idea of naming the university Mithila University arguing that if the university were named Mithila it would recruit staff from one particular caste (Maithil or Brahman) from Vice Chancellor to the peon. A Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) called Surendra Jha “Suman,”<sup>8</sup> in order to persuade Mandal to agree to the name Mithila, pointed out that Mandal also belonged to the Mithila and it was like a mother to Mandal too. B. P. Mandal promptly replied to Suman that he had only one mother and that was Mother-India. He was not unconvincing, and he voiced his worry in the following words: *Gaya baans jahan bagula baitha, gaya raaj jahan maithil baitha.*<sup>9</sup> The literal meaning is The bamboo is destroyed if a crane sits on it; similarly, the kingdom is destroyed if ruled by a Maithil Brahmin.

The honesty and integrity of B. P. Mandal was well-known. He was known for his straightforward, blunt approach, and not mincing words not only with his political opponents but also with his die-hard supporters. One of his political opponents Dr K. K. Mandal graciously acknowledged the qualities of B. P. Mandal:

B P Mandal was one of very few fearless, honest and upright men in Bihar's political history ... many contemporary political leaders did not like Mandalji's self-respect and often misunderstood it as his arrogance.

(Mandal 2003)

### **Madhepura: A socialist laboratory**

Though B. P. Mandal defeated B. N. Mandal in the very first general elections of independent India to become legislator of Bihar Vidhan Sabha in 1952, he was deeply influenced by B. N. Mandal's socialist ideals and commitment. B. N. Mandal was a friend and comrade of Ram Manohar Lohia. It is ironical, however, that B. N. has been forgotten despite turning Madhepura into a laboratory of “experimenting socialism.”<sup>10</sup> He was also known as the “Saint of Practicing Socialism.” In fact, when Lohia himself lost the Phulpur parliamentary constituency (near Allahabad) to Jawaharlal Nehru, B. N. was the sole voice of the Socialist Party in the Lok Sabha. J. B. Kriplani became the Member of Parliament in the byelection of 1953 on a Praja Socialist Party ticket from Saharsa-Bhagalpur dual constituency, one was reserved for the Scheduled Castes which was won by Kiray Musahar and the other was an open constituency which Kriplani won. Those who campaigned for Kriplani included Jai Prakash Narayan, Minu Masani, Sucheta Kriplani, Madhu Limaye and others (Yadav 1997). Ram Manohar Lohia had

deep attachment with Madhepura for the commitment of its people to socialist ideals. In one of the public meetings Lohia observed:

Why I keep coming to Madhepura time and again is because this socialist land has produced a competent, bold and fearless leader like Bhupendra Narayan Mandal who has been raising the voice of the people in the Indian parliament, loud and clear without any hesitation and without mincing any word. He will continue to do the same in future too.<sup>11</sup>

It was the third general elections, held in 1962, when B. N. representing the Praja Socialist Party defeated noted Congress leader Lalit Narayan Mishra from Saharsa Lok Sabha.<sup>12</sup> But the verdict was challenged in the court based on an allegation that B. N. Mandal used a casteist slogan “*Rome Hai Pope Ka, Madhepura Hai Gope Ka*” (Kumar 2008) in one of his pamphlets that had fanned communal sentiments. So much so that a personal secretary of Ram Manohar Lohia and Urmilesh Jha, in charge of the election campaign of B. N. aligned with L. N. Mishra for personal political gains and in a cold-blooded fashion produced a pamphlet that had his signature which was false. B. N. remained in Lok Sabha for two years, i.e., until 1964, when the court upheld the 1962 election result as null and void and barred B. N. from contesting any election for the next six years. Later, however, he won the case and was allowed to contest the byelection that was held in 1964 and defeated Lahtan Choudhary. While both the radio news as well as newspapers reported that B. N. Mandal had won, the Congress and a malleable bureaucracy, manipulated the vote count and declared the victory of the Congress candidate.

Bhupendra Narayan Mandal even today is vividly remembered and revered across length and breadth of Madhepura and Kaushiki region as a saint of renunciation. His concern for the poor and backward is part of popular folklore in the region although he has been dead for four decades now. B. N., in his speech in Lok Sabha on June 1, 1962, said:

Those people belonging to the backward classes must come in both legislature and governance. From the backward classes especially the women, Harijans (Dalits), backward Christians, the Ansaris and Dhunias amongst the Muslims etc. should have their representation of not less than 60 per cent. If this becomes possible, the affairs of governance will change drastically.<sup>13</sup>

### **B. P. Mandal's subaltern concerns and *Shoshit Dal*<sup>14</sup>**

In the village of Pama, about 12 kilometers southeast of Madhepura, the local Rajput landlords had attacked a Kurmi village (Kurmi being a backward caste). The police who were called to protect the villagers but instead took the side of the landlords and let loose an orgy of violence badly injuring scores of people. B. P. Mandal was in his native village of Murho at the time of the incident. At about 11 at night he visited Pama and after hearing about the sequence of events he left immediately to Patna where the Bihar Assembly was in session.<sup>15</sup> He made an exceptional intervention in the Assembly informing the house of the police excesses in graphic terms. He demanded immediate government action and compensation for the victims. The leader of the legislative party and then Chief Minister, Krishna Ballabh Sahay warned B. P. Mandal that such intervention against the government was not expected from a member sitting on the Treasury benches as this could come as an embarrassment for the both the ruling party and the government.

B. P. Mandal was clear in his mind about his commitments as a people's representative; he left the Treasury Bench and moved to an Opposition Bench which embarrassed the government

and the ruling Congress party even more. This rebellion of B. P. Mandal bought him into the limelight across the country. The national, state and local press splashed his rebellion on the front page. This act of revolt attracted the attention of Ram Manohar Lohia who invited B. P. Mandal to join his Samyukta Socialist Party (SSP).<sup>16</sup> He also offered B. P. Mandal the post of President of the State Parliamentary Board of the SSP. This episode caused unprecedented damage to the Congress Party and got B. P. Mandal enormous publicity as he toured the state campaigning for the SSP. He was also given a big say in selecting candidates for the election. The performance of the party candidates exceeded the expectations of the party. From a mere seven MLAs in the Assembly, the party got as many as 70 seats in the 1967 Assembly elections. It is interesting to note that out of the 70 candidates who won, 28 belonged to Upper Shudras. But despite the increased strength of legislators from the Shudra community in the Assembly, they remained under-represented in the Samyukta Vidhayak Dal government (Robin 2009). Bihar, however, saw for the first time a non-Congress government headed by Mahamaya Prasad as Chief Minister in which B. P. Mandal became the health minister (Srivastava 2002).

B. P. Mandal was a sitting Member of Parliament from Madhepura when he took charge of the Ministry of Health in Bihar as he had won the Lok Sabha on an SSP ticket. During his short stint as minister, he made many friends as well as many foes for his fearless, non-partisan and bold decisions. So much so, several sycophantic leaders complained to Lohia about him, and they wanted B. P. Mandal to return to Parliament leaving the ministry at the state level. Initially B P Mandal considered leaving the ministry, but one thing led to another, and he was asked to resign by Lohia. Mandal, however, opposed Lohia's high-handedness and instead of quitting the ministry he resigned from Parliament. It is said that this episode contributed to the widening of the gap between Mandal and Lohia.

Around this time Lohia had gained enormous popularity on the national stage and particularly in the Indian Parliament due to his three *aana* versus three rupees debate in the Lok Sabha. In his first parliamentary speech, Lohia, who was a severe critic of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and his government's policies, said that on one hand, there are more than 27 crore people who survived on three *aanas* per day (that is less than one-fourth of one rupee) and on the other hand, 300 rupees were being spent per month on the upkeep of the Prime Minister's dog. Lohia undoubtedly was at his political best and towered in his party hierarchy, but B. P. Mandal was aware of his own political strength and hence refused to bow to Lohia's bossy attitude. Mandal soon broke away from the SSP and announced the formation of Shoshit Dal on March 5, 1967 (Kumar 2013). In the 1968 elections, the Shoshit Dal, headed by B. P. Mandal, won the largest number of seats and with the outside support of Congress and the party formed the government. On February 1, 1968, B. P. Mandal took oath as the seventh Chief Minister of Bihar. This was historical as Mandal was the first ever chief minister in northern India who was a Shudra.<sup>17</sup> As he was a member of the Lok Sabha and not an MLA, he made his party MLA Satish Singh chief minister for four days, and the day he became a member of the Legislative Council, he was sworn in as the Chief Minister. According to the law, one had to be a member of either the Upper House or the Bihar Legislative Council, or the Lower House or the Legislative Assembly to become the Chief Minister.<sup>18</sup>

For the first time in the history of politics in northern India, the Bihar Cabinet had a larger number of Other Backward Classes (OBCs) as ministers than the upper castes. However, a group of defectors from the Congress Party headed by Binodanand Jha led to the fall of the Shoshit Dal government. The upper-caste MLAs made a "coalition of extremes" making the way to a Congress-supported government led by Bhola Paswan Shastri (an Ati-shudra) as Chief Minister but this government lasted for a mere three months. Another defection pushed Bihar under the President's rule (Robin 2009).

This episode had long-lasting effect in terms of mobilization and leadership among the Shudra castes. Though the government lasted for a brief period of 47 days, it drastically altered the composition and canvas of north Indian politics. After a year-long political instability coupled with President's rule and mid-term elections, another Shudra leader Daroga Prasad Rai of Congress (Ruling) led a coalition comprising six political parties and formed the government on February 16, 1968. For the second time, the share of OBC ministers was larger than that of the upper castes. He also appointed the Backward Classes Commission headed by Mungeri Lal, an Ati-shudra, (belonging to the "Dusadh" community, a Scheduled Caste) which was to recommend reservations for the OBCs in education and employment. This recommendation was implemented by another Shudra leader, Kapoori Thakur who took charge of the state on December 22, 1970.<sup>19</sup>

The B. P. Mandal government, though it survived for a really short stint, is still known for its honest, non-sectarian bold decisions and able governance. Its position on corruption was clear and uncompromising. It is not surprising at all for students of Indian politics that this government fell because of the non-compromising position of the Chief Minister B. P. Mandal who refused to kowtow to the manipulations of the Congress leadership even though the Shoshit Dal was dependent on the Congress for the survival of its government. The erstwhile government headed by Mahamaya Prasad had constituted an enquiry commission headed by T. L. Venkatarama Aiyar to look into the corruption charges against several senior Congress leaders including some ministers. Since the Shoshit Dal government depended on Congress' support, the Congress Party began to pressurize B. P. Mandal to dismantle the Aiyar Commission (Srivastava 2002). But he chose to sacrifice his government and the chief ministership rather than agree to the unethical bargain of the Congress Party. It is interesting to note here, when the no-confidence motion was brought against the Shoshit Dal government, and it was quite obvious that the government would fall, the then Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi sent a message to B. P. Mandal to resign before the no confidence motion was introduced in the Assembly, as her fear was that not only would Congress be embarrassed by the letting-down of its partner but that it would further divide the Congress Party. In return, Mrs Gandhi promised to make B. P. Mandal the governor of a state. But B. P. Mandal had made up his mind to face the motion in order to expose the Congress Party on the floor of the Assembly. While the debate on the no confidence motion against the government was in progress, Mrs Gandhi made her final attempt to convince Mandal on the telephone but Mandal refused to take her call. He instead deputed one of his colleagues to convey this message to Mrs Gandhi:

Please tell the Prime Minister that I will not resign. I will face the Assembly and the consequences of the voting in the confidence motion. I do not want any of the high positions that she wants to offer to me.<sup>20</sup>

Once the Shoshit Dal government fell, B. P. Mandal yet again contested the Lok Sabha byelection for Madhepura which he had vacated for his short but exciting career in state politics. He won the seat comfortably in 1968. In 1971, he lost narrowly against the Congress candidate Chaudhary Rajendra Prasad Yadav but soon, in 1972, he was elected to the Bihar Legislative Assembly. In 1974, when Jai Prakash Narayan started the agitation against the incumbent and corrupt Congress regime, B. P. Mandal joined the movement and resigned from the Assembly in protest. And yet again became the member of Lok Sabha on a Janata Party ticket in the elections that were held in 1977, immediately after the Emergency was lifted. His opposition to Mrs Indira Gandhi and Congress was based on sound political reasons and never based on emotional or personal reasons. In 1977, Gandhi was roundly defeated by Raj Narain of the

Janata Party. She however sought refuge in the Chikmagalur Lok Sabha seat in Karnataka, where D. B. Chandre Gowda vacated the seat that he had managed to win during the anti-Congress wave that swept the country in 1977. In the byelection that followed, Mrs Gandhi won the seat. However, the Janata government brought about a resolution to debar Mrs Gandhi from Parliament. Although B. P. Mandal was a senior parliamentarian of the Janata Party, he did not see any merit in the resolution and opposed the decision of his own party and the government.

The second stint in B. P. Mandal's political career started in 1977 when he was elected for the Madhepura parliamentary constituency on a Janata Party ticket. His political friends and allies were sure that B. P. Mandal would be taken into the Cabinet of the Janata Party government headed by Morarji Desai. However, he was not given a Cabinet seat but soon he was appointed as the Chairman of the Second Backward Classes Commission which was an election promise of the Janata Party. During the inaugural function of the setting-up of the Commission, the Prime Minister was accompanied by two deputy prime ministers Babu Jagjivan Ram and Chaudhary Charan Singh. It is worthwhile to mention here that Charan Singh was against the formation the Backward Classes Commission as he was a supporter of reservation based on economic criteria and not on the basis of caste (Mandal 2003).

On December 20, 1978, the Janata Government headed by Morarji Desai announced the appointment of the Second Backward Classes Commission and B. P. Mandal was named as the Chairman. He took a keen and personal interest in drafting the report with the help of an expert committee<sup>21</sup> comprising of eminent anthropologists and sociologists of the time including B. K. Roy Burman, M. N. Srinivas, Yogendra Singh and M. S. A. Rao, among others. The Commission report was on December 31, 1980, but was kept in abeyance for a decade. The position of the Congress Party which was in power at the Centre during the period 1980–9 was always dubious on the issue of reservation; hence, there was no action on the Commission report. Even in Bihar, when it made a comeback after the Emergency, the then Chief Minister Jagannath Mishra, who opposed the introduction of reservation for OBCs, ignored the Mungeri Lal Commission report (Robin 2009).

B. P. Mandal remained an honorary member of Bihar State Citizens' Forum from 1980 to 1982. He died of a heart attack on April 13, 1982, at the age of 64.

### **Mandal Commission**

There is equality only among equals. To equate unequals is to perpetuate inequality.<sup>22</sup>

India's Constituent Assembly had made a passing reference to the OBCs when the Prime Minister Nehru moved the "Objective Resolution" but as the Assembly did not have any representation of the backward classes, the new constitution did not come up with anything except Article 340 which had a mandate that the President may appoint a commission to investigate conditions of socially and educationally backward classes, the difficulties under which they labor and make recommendations to remove such difficulties and improve their conditions (Bakshi 2006). But this mandate hardly meant anything as it was silent on the issue of a direct action plan for the advancement of the toiling masses. Dr B. R. Ambedkar, while resigning from Nehru's cabinet after the failure of the Hindu Code Bill, voiced his concerns in his resignation letter addressed to Nehru:

I will now refer to another matter that has made me dissatisfied with the government. It relates to treatment accorded to the Backward Classes and Scheduled Castes. I was very sorry that the Constitution did not embody any safeguards for the Backward

Classes. It was left to be done by the Executive Government on the basis of recommendation of a Commission to be appointed by the President.

(Rege 2013)

The mandate enshrined in Article 340, however, resulted in two backward classes commissions, the first one headed by Kaka Kalelkar and the second by B. P. Mandal. The First Backward Classes Commission was appointed on January 29, 1953, and it submitted its report on March 30, 1955. This report reproduced the biased and historically prejudiced attitudes of the upper classes. The Commission Report read:

The age-old resignation of the masses to their lord is gone. They no longer believe that it is fate that has kept them backward. They are not yet alive to their share in the backwardness, *viz.*, apathy, lethargy and negligence. They are too backward to be introspective and to find out what is wrong with themselves. It is but natural and to some extent, justifiable, that they should find fault with the situation around them, and their eyes should be riveted on the fact of their being exploited by the upper classes. Their representatives and leaders have read the literature that we evolved in finding faults with the evils of the British rule. They have come to know how one race dominates another and how those who have to suffer have, perforce to unite against the forces of vested interests. They have heard of inevitability of class conflict. No wonder they are prone to draw hasty conclusions ... I would plead, therefore that the case of backward classes too needs to be analyzed critically, and it is no use marshalling evidence to prove that the accusations leveled at the upper classes by the backward classes are not substantially correct, and that it is only the interested representatives that distort the situation. Even conceding that the whole picture is one sided and over-drawn, one has to recognize that there is uneasiness in the minds of the masses and this uneasiness is gaining momentum.

(*First Backward Classes Commission Report 1955*)

The chairman of the First Backward Classes Commission, Kaka Kalelkar, was a Congress Member of Parliament and a Brahmin from Maharashtra. The chairman adopted a very dubious and ambiguous position *vis-à-vis* the recommendations of the Commission. Although he did not record a formal minute of dissent, in his forwarding letter to the President he opposed the acceptance of caste as the basis of backwardness. He also expressed his reservation regarding several other important recommendations made by the Commission.<sup>23</sup> The recommendations of the First Backward Classes Commission were not debated in the Parliament, or implemented. Two decades after the submission of the Kaka Kalelkar Commission, the political upheaval of the during Emergency and its aftermath, the issue of constituting a fresh Backward Classes Commission was part of the agenda of the main opposition led by the Janata Party. It was only when the Janata Party was voted to power in 1977 that the Second Backward Classes Commission was constituted in 1978. There is no denying the fact, notwithstanding a malicious campaign by academia, press and intelligentsia against the Second Backward Classes Commission Report; it is a definitive improvement over the First Backward Classes Commission Report (Yadav 1994).

The attitude of the ruling classes in the country is such that no effort was made to debate and implement the recommendations of the First Backward Classes Commission as a remedy for doing away with the social and educational backwardness of the toiling Shudra masses. As B. R. Ambedkar had noted in the concluding session of the Constituent Assembly, “On 26th January 1950, we are going to enter into a life of contradictions. In politics, we will have

equality and in social economic life, we will have inequality.” This notion of inequality hardly became a point of serious debate either in the Parliament or outside it. It was the Mandal Commission Report which raised not just the contradictions within the ruling classes but also the internal contradiction in the principle of equality itself. It raised a pertinent question of “social justice” in the notion of equality:

Equality before law is a basic fundamental Right guaranteed under Article 14 of the Indian Constitution. But the principle of “equality” is a double-edged weapon. It places the strong and the handicapped on the same footing in the race of life. It is a dictum of social justice that there is equality only among equals. To treat unequals as equals is to perpetuate inequality. The humanness of society is determined by the degree of protection it provides to its weaker, handicapped and less gifted members ... “Equality of Opportunity” and “equality of treatment” places the weak and the strong on par; to that extent, it amounts to denial of social justice. In fact, it is “equality of results” which is the acid test of society’s egalitarian pretensions. In a highly unequal society like ours, it is only by giving special protection and privileges to the under-privileged section of society that we can enable the weak to resist exploitation by the strong.

(Second Backward Classes Commission Report 1980)

Two scholars of renown, Marc Galanter and Christophe Jaffrelot, have done commendable work studying the issues of the Backward Classes, the Mandal Commission and its after effects. Galanter’s book *Competing Equalities: Law and the Backward Classes in India* (1984) remains a landmark on the subject. Similarly, Jaffrelot’s book *India’s Silent Revolution: The Rise of the Low Castes in North Indian Politics* (2003) is a commendable contribution to this scholarship. Although the movements pushing for the benefits of the backward classes have not been well documented, the academic contribution in favor of affirmative action for the backward classes finds ample visibility. Though the movement that started against Mandal’s implementation appeared omnipresent, the movements in favor of Mandal were often ignored, misread and misinterpreted. Southern India had many social movements but the political translation was best managed in the northern states of India, with several caste groups and associations making remarkable and lasting contributions. Jaffrelot notes:

Even though the Kurmis organized themselves as early as the Yadavs did by means of caste associations, the Yadavs have been at the forefront of the OBC mobilization from the very beginning. The leader of the All India Backward Castes Federation in the 1960s and 1970s, Brahma Prakash Chaudhary was a Yadav. B P Mandal was himself a Yadav and after the Janta Dal took over in 1989 the Yadavs campaigned in favour of the report’s implementation more actively than anybody else.

(Jaffrelot 2003)

But Rajendra Yadav, a noted litterateur and critic saw this phenomenon more critically and saw it as monopolization of the Mandal movement by particular caste groups. While the numerical strength of a particular caste group mattered one cannot ignore the problem of fragmentation within the backward classes/castes. Rajendra Yadav also pointed out another endemic problem with the backward movements:

We provided an opportunity of unflinching freedom and self-determination to the people belonging to middle castes that were squeezed from above by upper castes and

worked on their instructions. These middle castes were the managers of the whole management of the upper castes. But these middle castes, the moment they got this freedom, this self-dependence, leave alone the issue of some representation they got in employment here and there or political opportunities, many things happened for that matter. But gradually what we found that these middle castes did not just make themselves independent but also unrestrained because there lacked education, lacked social values and a moral consciousness. A lack of sense of responsibility made them unbridled. Their hidden wish to become ruler took a brutal turn. They were not in a position to do anything towards those who were above them in social hierarchy but what they did to those who were below i.e., Dalits, we are aware of.

(Yadav 2003)

Since the Mandal days, our society and its politics have been going through a process of democratization. This has been visible in the rank and file of the political parties, their organizational structure and even in terms of representation within the government. It is pertinent to note here that Mandal also helped in sharpening the edge of the Dalit movement and Dalit politics. Leaders like Ram Vilas Paswan, the then Union Minister of Welfare, took a keen interest in the implementation of the Commission's recommendations. Kanshi Ram's Bahujan Samaj Party also played a crucial role in generating enthusiastic public opinion across north India in favor of the implementation of the Mandal Report (Hilsayan 2004). Thus, mobilization of the backward classes under the banner of Mandal and contemporary Dalit movements displayed solidarity for each other both rhetorically and symbolically. This had far-reaching consequences in terms of upholding B. R. Ambedkar as a symbol of social justice. Jaffrelot listed some of the landmark actions initiated by the Parliament in 1990 as a result of the backward caste movement:

Dr Ambedkar's portrait was placed in the main hall of Parliament alongside other freedom movement leaders, and a law was passed so that the benefits extended to the Hindu and Sikh Scheduled Castes would also be made available to Dalits who had adopted Buddhism. The Lok Sabha also passed the Constitution (68th Amendment) Bill which sought to set up a five-member statutory commission for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. More importantly, the political context created by the Mandal affair gave more visibility to the claims of the Scheduled Castes (since) Dalit politics had receded into the background after the death of Ambedkar.

(Jaffrelot 2003)

The 1990s became one of the most tumultuous moments in post-independence India. From media to intelligentsia, every privileged stakeholder demonstrated their displeasure and anger against the government for its decision to implement the Mandal Report. The entire civil society of the privileged people accused the government of dividing society based on caste lines and spreading casteism in society. Many went to the extent of saying that the government would divide the nation into two. It was even more surprising that the spectacular protests against this decision of the government found solidarity among all ideological shades, the left, the right and the center. The one common understanding that those opposing the government decision shared was that the entire pie of the government services which was in their exclusive control would now have to be shared by the "undeserving" Shudras. Eminent intellectuals and writers Nivedita Menon and Aditya Nigam described the scenario:

As soon as the government announced its decision to implement the commission's recommendations, all hell broke loose. There were widespread violent agitations all over north India, with the sons and daughters of "respectable families" taking to the streets. It was an unprecedented sight to see these young people, generally cynical about all political activity, taking to road blockades, demonstrations, picketing ... many of them even committed public self-immolations. Equally interesting was sight of the usually cynical media backing the agitators to the hilt. New terms such as "Mandalization of politics" entered public political discourse generally referring, strangely, to a reprehensible division of Indian society along caste lines – as though caste oppression was a matter belonging to some very distant past.

*(Menon and Nigam 2007)*

What was even more worrisome was that the noted academicians of the time did not bother to look into the empirical findings of the Mandal Commission, nor into its argument in favor of social justice or its recommendations seeking equality of opportunities. Instead, they saw it as an action motivated by shortsightedness of political gain. Even the legal scholars saw it going against the provisions enshrined by the Indian Constitution. Upendra Baxi, a leading legal academic and the then Vice Chancellor of the University of Delhi did not agree that the implementation of the Commission's recommendations, in any way, was capable of doing away with the backwardness of the backward classes. Baxi, in his elitist and eloquent sophistry, observed:

the purported implementation of the Mandal Commission Report has now sought to seal it in ways which have outraged the nation, regardless of whether one is for or against reservations. Politics of accommodations and consensus has now yielded to politics of dire and desperate confrontation on all sides, without any real prospect of amelioration of the backward classes and with the attendant cost of even discrediting the very idea of reservational equality for the Scheduled communities which so far appeared unimpeachable. It would indeed require vision of India and statespersonship of that order which fashioned the Indian Constitution now for this un-impeachability to be fully restored and for imaginative reconstruction of backwardness, tackling its problems at its very roots, to emerge.<sup>24</sup>

Yet there were honest academicians who studied the Mandal Report carefully. Many of them saw the report as a document which had meticulously identified the endemic problems of society, which resulted in a majority of Shudras being deprived of their legitimate share in the governance and managing the state's affairs. Until the findings of the Mandal Commission were brought to the floor of the Parliament and debated, nobody really paid any heed to the fact of massive exclusion of the huge mass of population that had lagged behind in education and employment. The findings of the report, most importantly, highlighted the monopoly over educational and administrative affairs by a minuscule population which exclusively belonged to the so called "upper caste-upper class." Both Menon and Nigam observed in retrospect:

What became clear in the wake of the Mandal Commission Report, however, was that this large group of OBCs who constituted close to 60 per cent of the population, had a negligible presence in government employment: about 4 per cent. Also worth bearing in mind is the fact that even this smaller representation in employment was restricted to the lower rungs of government jobs. In other words, the overwhelming majority

of the public services were monopolized by the small crust of upper castes. In one estimate made by sociologist Satish Deshpande, about 20 per cent of the population controlled about 95 per cent of all jobs.

(Menon and Nigam 2007)

### **Myths about the Mandal Commission**

The Mandal Commission Report is a document that visualized a comprehensive road map for upholding social justice in India and yet it is one of the most non-read, non-discussed and non-accessed documents. It might sound ironic and even stunning but it is true that the National Commission for Backward Classes which has its headquarters in New Delhi does not have a single copy of the Second Backward Classes Commission Report, popularly known as the Mandal Commission Report.<sup>25</sup> A whole lot of propaganda was created around the Mandal Report, as in the instance that the report was written by an uneducated Parliamentarian which was based on caste prejudice and bias. How religion and mythology were used to weave the web of the caste system in this subcontinent has been made crystal clear by the Second Backward Classes Commission Report at the very beginning in the following words:

The real triumph of the caste system lies not in upholding the supremacy of the Brahmins, but in the conditioning the consciousness of the lower castes in accepting their inferior status in the ritual hierarchy as a part of the natural order of things. In India, the caste system has endured for over 3000 years and even today, there appear no symptoms of its early demise. No social institution containing so large an element of social inequality and discrimination towards majority of the people can survive that long in a purely social context. It was through an elaborate complex and subtle scheme of scripture, mythology and ritual that Brahmanism succeeded in investing the caste system with a moral authority that has been seldom effectively challenged even by the most ardent social reformers.

(Second Backward Classes Commission Report 1980)

The United Front (UF) was voted to power at the Centre in 1990 riding on the anti-corruption wave of Bofors and anti-incumbency of the then Congress government led by Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. Vishwanath Pratap Singh headed the UF government. The core constituent of this government was Janata Dal, to which V. P. Singh belonged. The UF government, based on their pre-poll manifesto of the Janata Dal, announced the implementation recommendations of the Mandal Commission Report in August 1990. On being asked by a journalist whether it was only for the political mileage that the Prime Minister sowed the seeds of social conflict, V. P. Singh responded:

You see, we adopted the Mandal Report with the sole purpose of pushing the socially and educationally backwards of the society and ensure their participation in power. Since it was there in our party (Janata Dal) manifesto, it was our duty to implement the recommendations of Mandal Report and we only did that. Those status-quoists who are opposing Mandal and putting forward a bogey of argument that this will create bitter caste feelings in society must be told that the list of the beneficiaries in the list included all those castes and sub-castes that are socially and educationally backwards.<sup>26</sup>

While the issue of social justice for Dalit Muslims and Dalit Christians has come into focus in the recent past, it was the Mandal Commission that recognized and gave reservation to Muslims and Christians on the basis of their caste occupations. There is a long list of those who are Muslims and Christians and are engaged in caste occupations equivalent to the Hindu Scheduled Castes such as *mochi*, *dhobi/qassar*, *nalband*, *halakhor*, *lalbegi*, *meena* and *mina*. It is worth noting here, the entire debate of political recognition and representation received unprecedented attention since the Mandal Commission Report was accepted by the V. P. Singh government. While on the one hand it brought the Shudra masses out of their inferiority complex of claiming their Shudra status, on the other hand it lent momentum to expressions and assertions of self-confidence by a huge number of the Shudra and Ati-shudra masses who had internalized their exclusion from mainstream as their “fate,” and it was pre-ordained. Importantly, this encouraged the political formations like the Samajwadi Party and the Bahujan Samaj Party that promised their constituents “social justice,” political representation and empowerment.

### Myths of meritocracy

Even the First Backward Classes Commission spelled out quite clearly the criteria for backwardness. It identified two clear-cut reference criteria for studying backwardness: One, to determine the criteria for considering any particular categories of people in India be treated as socially and educationally backward classes; and in accordance with such criteria preparing a list of such classes and also their approximate number and their territorial distribution. Two, investigating the work conditions of all socially and educationally backward classes and the circumstances under which they work (First Backward Classes Commission Report 1955). The First Backward Classes Commission report was neither pursued nor were its findings discussed in the public sphere by the succeeding Congress governments at the Centre. There has always been a cynical viewpoint and vehement opposition to the idea of considering caste to be the basis of backwardness but even the Kaka Kalelkar Commission on this pertinent question had categorically observed:

We tried to avoid caste but we found it difficult to ignore caste in the present prevailing conditions. We wish it were easy to dissociate caste from social backwardness at the present juncture. In modern times, anybody can take to any profession. The Brahman taking to tailoring does not become a tailor by caste, nor is his social status lowered as a Brahman. A Brahman may be a seller of boots and shoes and yet his social status is not lowered thereby. Social backwardness, therefore, is not today due to the particular profession of a person but we cannot escape caste in considering the social backwardness in India.<sup>27</sup>

But the elitist viewpoint of the commission came through, as did its casteist and conservative opinion. The monopoly of the so-called higher castes on education and, therefore, control over the higher government services came naturally to them. Nobody wonders why even today there is almost 100 percent “reservation” of the so-called lowest castes in menial jobs like scavenging and for *safai-karamcharis*. The dignity of labor is most often not honored; instead, it is mocked in public (Ilaiah 2007). Kaka Kalelkar spelled out his own reservations against extending benefits of reservation in jobs for those identified as “backward” despite their social and educational backwardness in the following words:

I am definitely against reservation in Government Services for any community for the simple reason that the services are not meant for servants but they are meant for

the service of the society as a whole. Administration must have the services of the best men available in the land and these may be found in all communities. Reservation of posts for certain backward communities would be as strange as reservation of patients for particular doctors. The patients are not meant to supply adequate or proportionate clientele to all doctors, whatever their qualifications.

*(First Backward Classes Commission Report 1955)*

The First Backward Classes Commission further highlighted a strange logic of justifying its anti-reservation position that there are backward classes even within communities following religions other than Hinduism and that it will have an ill-effect on communities following Islam and Christianity. What is surprising here is that this commission had a mandate to find a solution for those millions that had been excluded from the governance of the nation for centuries; yet it gave excuses for not extending affirmative action for these people even if they were following religious faiths other than Hinduism, to pave the way for an inclusive society. This irony is quite visible in the words of the Chairman of the Commission:

Being convinced that the upper castes among the Hindus have to atone for the neglect of which they were guilty towards the “lower” classes, I was prepared to recommend the government that all special help should be given only to the backward classes and even the poor and even deserving among the upper classes may be safely kept out from the benefit of this special help. My eyes were however opened to the dangers of suggesting remedies on caste basis when I discovered that it is going to have a most unhealthy effect on the Muslim and Christian sections of the nation. It is patent fact that the bulk of the Muslims and Christians in India are converts from the Hindu fold. This conversion was encouraged by the fact that Islam and Christianity were fundamentally opposed to caste. The “lower castes” in the Hindu fold left their traditional religion and joined the religion of the ruling race because they felt assured that in that way they would be free from tyranny of caste and caste prejudice.<sup>28</sup>

But the very question of backward castes and communities belonging to religions other than Hinduism was addressed by the Mandal Commission report by including many of these caste groups in the list of the beneficiaries. While it is assumed that by conversion they have escaped discriminatory behavior by the upper castes, the ground reality suggests the contrary. The ethnographic research testifies to the fact that a majority of Muslim communities in India are converts from Hindu social order. It is further suggested that a majority of these communities faced discrimination in the religious faith they were born into and therefore, in order to escape the discrimination they took voluntary refuge in Islam, seeking egalitarianism. But the everydayness of caste reveals that most of the Shudra castes who converted to the newer faith could not give up their traditional occupations and therefore, even after conversion, the names of such communities either remained the same or at most, assumed corresponding caste/community names and hence, their social status remained unchanged.<sup>29</sup> The Mandal Commission Report pointed out the underlying reason for this:

Though caste system is peculiar to Hindu society yet, in actual practice, it also pervades the non-Hindu communities in varying categories. There are two main reasons for this phenomenon: first, caste system is a great conditioner of the mind and leaves an

indelible mark on a person's social consciousness and cultural mores. Consequently, even after conversion, the ex-Hindus carried with them their deeply ingrained ideas of social hierarchy and stratification. This resulted in the Hindu converts inadvertently acting as Trojan horses of caste system among highly egalitarian religions such as Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, etc. Secondly, non-Hindu minorities living in pre-dominantly Hindu India could not escape from its dominant social and cultural influences. Thus, from within and without, caste among non-Hindu communities received continuous sustenance and stimulus.

*(Second Backward Classes Commission Report 1980)*

### **Meritocracy versus equality of opportunity**

The argument in favor of reservation is nullified by the elitist and regressive logic that the distribution of opportunities if not distributed on the basis of merit, will yield an unequal result, thus undermining the quality. But this line of argument presupposes an imagined "merit" which has to be situated in a given society. One fails to understand how there can be an imagined unitary and universal merit which is applicable to societies across the globe. Merit by its very nature is subjective and context-specific. The very notion of merit is usually misplaced, misunderstood and misappropriated. An exclusive and extraordinary merit for one can be ordinary common-sense for the other. Skinning a dead cow or buffalo and transforming the skin into a fine leather shoe might appear an ordinary skill<sup>30</sup> when compared to learning the alphabet or chanting memorized Sanskrit shlokas. The whole idea of merit has been delineated by K. Balagopal in the following eloquent words:

the Brahmanical theory of knowledge continues to shape the curriculum of our schools and colleges, and it is proficiency in this knowledge defined as book learning that is being called "merit." One only has to imagine scrapping this curriculum or replacing it with knowledge about cropping, weaving and carpentry and imagine then how handicapped the brahmanised upper castes would find themselves in such schools, to recognize the ridiculous snobbery of this whole debate about "merit." Either we get rid of this undemocratic educational culture, or else—since there are no signs today of such a change—accept the necessity of providing with reservations those people who are at disadvantage in this educational culture, not because they are incapable of book learning but because they have been kept out of it for ages. And since it is on the basis of caste that they have been kept out, it is only on the basis of caste that we can identify the needy in this matter. It requires a special blindness to ignore the fact that our cultural life is still caste determined ...

*(Balagopal 1990)*

However, merit, particularly in the Indian context, has been contextualized in an entirely different fashion for the convenience of the advantaged few. When we look at merit critically and comprehensively, it is clear that the very logic of merit is distanced from reality. Those who accused the UF government headed by V. P. Singh of hurriedly implementing the Mandal Commission Report for political mileage need to listen to his point of view which he elaborated in an unambiguous fashion on the floor of the Parliament. His was a political mandate and, therefore, he took it as a political commitment to implement what his party promised in the election manifesto. He took a categorical and principled position to make the administration

and bureaucracy more responsive and informed about the needs of the disadvantaged populace. In the face of severe criticism in the parliament from not just the Opposition but from those political parties on whose support the government was surviving, V. P. Singh unambiguously articulated his position:

what we have in education is scholastic merit in certain subjects. And that pertains to the individual—individual merit. But the basic lacuna ... in the education system which gets reflected in the administrative system is what about the social merit of a person? Not how much knowledgeable he is but how he relates to the other human beings ... what is the criticism about the administration or bureaucracy today? Not that it is not knowledgeable or that it is mediocre ... [but] that it does not care. A mother is a mother, not because she is an intellectual [but] because she cares; and that is what people look for, in the administration. And if that be so, we will have to redefine what is administrative merit ... to put a social content into it ... those who have gone through suffering, those who know the pinch ... if they are in the administration, they will be more responsive.

(*Bajpai 2011*)

Even on the question of providing equal opportunity, this qualm is most often witnessed that our society should, at most, guarantee equality of opportunity, but not equality of results. Usually, such arguments come as a direct attack against the governmental attempt to redistribute wealth and opportunities in the form of reservation or affirmative actions. Such interventions are based on a basic premise that the role of government must be restricted until it can ensure that everyone starts from the same point, not that everyone ends up in the same condition. What is implicit in this argument is that on a given equal opportunity if they end up worse off, the government must not intervene to help them (Stauss 1992). But a point of contention for the Mandal debate was to provide equality of opportunity and not equality of result. The Mandal Commission, with its rigorous field-based findings, realized that even thinking of equality of opportunity was a Herculean task in India where inequity and inequality are both systemic and endemic. The Mandal Report substantiated its position on equality of opportunity with a beautiful lived example:

Mohan comes from a fairly well-off middle-class family and both his parents are well educated. He attends one of the good public schools in the city which provides a wide range of extra-curricular activities. At home, he has a separate room for himself and is assisted in his studies by both his parents. There is a television and radio set in the house and his father subscribes to a number of magazines. In the choice of his studies and finally his career, he is continuously guided by his parents and teachers. Most of his friends are of similar background and he is fully aware of the nature of the highly competitive world in which he will have to carve a suitable place for himself. Some of his relations are fairly influential people and he can bank on the right sort of recommendation or push at the right moment ... On the other hand, Lallu is a village boy and his backward parents occupy a low social position in the village caste hierarchy. His father owns a 4-acre plot of agricultural land. Both his parents are illiterate and his family of eight lives huddled in a two-room hut. Whereas a primary school is located in his village, for his high school he has to walk a distance of nearly three kilometers both ways. Keen on pursuing higher studies, he persuaded his parents to send him to an uncle at the Tehsil headquarters. He never received any guidance regarding the

course of studies to be followed or the career to be chosen. Most of his friends did not study beyond middle school level. He was never exposed to any stimulating cultural environment and he completed his college education without much encouragement from any quarter. Owing to his rural background, he has a rustic appearance. Despite his college education, his pronunciation is poor, his manners awkward and he lacks self-confidence.

*(Second Backward Classes Commission Report 1980)*

Ironically, even after more than two decades or so since the implementation of the Mandal Report, not much has changed in terms of the curriculum, to make it more organic and responsive for the purpose of producing a more informed and able citizenry. We still have a curriculum which has very little to do with a production-linked knowledge system which is dependent on the creative skills of the masses, whether farmers or artisans. In fact, the whole curriculum system has a definitive upper caste/class perspective and therefore the idea of inclusion is difficult to incorporate. With the introduction of new curriculum under the Four Years Undergraduate Program (FYUP) at the University of Delhi,<sup>31</sup> there is a possibility that students can graduate without confronting “caste,” or rather how to eradicate caste.<sup>32</sup>

### **Fear of misusing reservation benefit misplaced**

Another argument by those who oppose caste-based reservation is that the benefits of reservation will be cornered by a section of the elite from among the OBCs. While it is logical to argue that the benefits of affirmative action and reservations should not be misused by those who do not require them, to disparage the entire concept of reservation or affirmative action reflects the conservative mindset of those opposing it. There must be a realization of how such benefits can be made available by the state to those needing such patronage most, resulting in the maximum benefit for them. But it is fallacious to assume that any welfare measure by the state will reach the neediest at the earliest. However, this cannot be the basis for denying such a benefit altogether. The Mandal Report had a befitting reply to this line of argument. The report unequivocally stated:

It is no doubt true that the major benefits of reservation and other welfare measures for Other Backward Classes will be cornered by the more advanced sections of the backward communities. But is not this a universal phenomenon? All reformist remedies have to contend with a slow recovery along the hierarchical gradient; there are no quantum jumps in social reform. Moreover, human nature being what it is, a “new class” ultimately does emerge even in classless society. The chief merit of reservation is not that it will introduce egalitarianism amongst OBCs when the rest of the Indian society is seized by all sorts of inequalities. But reservation will certainly erode the hold of higher castes on the (government) services and enable OBCs in general to have a sense of participation in running the affairs of this country.<sup>33</sup>

### **Myth of class and caste**

The class–caste debate in Indian academia, as well as in Indian politics, has been going on for a considerable period of time. This debate was complicated further as both Marxist scholars and activists saw “class” as a universal category and “caste” as a local variant which emerged more out of religious sanction and not due to material conditions. The long-assumed notion of “divi-

sion of labor” remained its distinct characteristic. B. R. Ambedkar, however, brought about the notion of caste being not merely “division of labor” as we are made to believe but it was “division of laborers” as well.<sup>34</sup> But this debate with respect to the issue of determining backwardness remained an issue of serious contention and contestation. I. P. Desai (1984) elaborated on this.

The semantic equivalence between “class” and “caste” goes against the meanings of these two words in social sciences as well as in the language of educated Indians influenced by the language of social sciences. Of course, there is no unanimity about the meaning of the term “class” in social sciences. In particular, there are sharp differences between the Marxist and non-Marxist views. Nevertheless, any social scientist would hardly stretch the word “class” to mean “caste.”

(Shah 1997)

Sharad Patil illustrated a common point of agreement even for the Marxists when he used E. M. S. Namboodiripad’s definition as “Caste is the main form in which class manifests itself.”<sup>35</sup> While many a Marxist agreed with the methodology adopted by the Mandal Commission like Sharad Patil himself who at least agreed that the method adopted was appropriate for identifying backward castes, but not for abolishing caste, many Marxists denied the very existence of caste. While the left parties kept on harping on at the “semantics” of class and material conditions determining the social conditions, the Supreme Court of India in its landmark decision<sup>36</sup> on the validity of the Mandal Report implementation, understood the context of Indian social conditions and categorically resolved:

a caste can be and quite often is a social class in India. If it is backward socially, it would be a backward class for the purposes of Article 16(4). Among non-Hindus, there are several occupational groups, sects and denominations, which for historical reasons are socially backward. They too represent backward social collectivities for the purpose of Article 16(4) ... it is not correct to say that the backward class of citizens contemplated in Article 16(4) is the same as the socially and educationally backward classes referred to in Article 15(4). It is much wider. The accent in Article 16(4) is on backwardness. Of course, social, educational and economic backwardness are closely intertwined in the Indian context.

(Yadav 1994)

Initially, the Left Front governments particularly in West Bengal and Kerala were reluctant to stand in defense of the Mandal implementation as their electoral mobilization worked mostly in the garb of class-narrative (Kumar and Guha 2014). So much so Jyoti Basu in his reply to the Mandal Commission had stated that “in West Bengal there were only two castes: rich and poor” (Bandyopadhyay 2012). But contrary to this, A. N. Saha, the Secretary of the West Bengal Backward Classes Federation made a submission to the Mandal Commission that the economic criterion did not find any place in the Indian Constitution for the purpose of identifying OBCs. He further added that casteism was very much present in West Bengal and that there were hardly inter-caste marriages and contended that there was hardly any improvement in living conditions of about 105 communities that were listed as backward by Kaka Kalelkar Commission (Second Backward Classes Commission Report 1980).

### **Mandal Report: Manifesto of social inclusion**

The Mandal Commission did a landmark reading of the fact that caste and caste-based hierarchy is not restricted to believers of Hinduism as is popularly believed.<sup>37</sup> It was realized by the

commission in its empirical field-based study that a majority of the socially and educationally backward population could be found not just among the Hindus but also in the Islamic and Christian faiths. It was perhaps the principle of social justice only that led the Commission to arrive at a conclusion to include several caste groups of other faiths in the category of OBC. The Commission, during its course of study, found that a majority of Muslims as well as Christians are converts from Hinduism and a majority of them continued their caste occupations even after conversion. This meant that even after conversion, their social and educational status hardly improved. Thus, the non-Hindu OBCs comprised of: (i) all untouchables converted to a non-Hindu religion and (ii) such occupational communities known by their hereditary occupations like *dheemar, nai, badhai*, etc. The report further made it clear that:

Conversion from one faith to another did not change the socio-economic status of a person. It was therefore desirable that converts from Scheduled Castes to Buddhism, Christianity etc. should be treated as Scheduled Castes, but until this change was brought about by legislation, all such converts should be listed as OBCs.

The report also said felt that the economically backward classes should be treated as a separate entity from the socially and educationally backward classes. As an example of blind priestly prejudice against low castes it cited the incident when Lord Mountbatten had invited Dr B. R. Ambedkar, a member of his executive council to accompany him on a visit to Jagannath Puri temple. While the temple priests happily welcomed Mountbatten to enter the temple, they refused permission to Dr Ambedkar (Second Backward Classes Commission Report 1980).

The Mandal Commission, based on empirical evidence, categorized more than 80 castes among Muslims as OBCs. Pasmanda Muslim Mahaz, a Bihar-based social organization, pursued the question of Dalit Muslims (Anwar 2001). The case for Dalit Muslims and Christians is being pursued on the plea that those caste groups practice the same occupations, like cobbling and manual scavenging, like their Hindu counterparts. There has been legal intervention as well, but it has yielded no result to date, as the Presidential Order of 1950 has been a hurdle considering that it lays down that only those caste groups that were categorized as Scheduled Castes had to be Hindus. Subsequent amendments, however, have included Sikhs in 1976 and Buddhists in 1990. What is worth noting here is the fact that those among the non-Hindu people struggling to be given the status of Scheduled Castes (SCs) were accorded the status of OBCs by the Mandal Report.

The Mandal Report has also identified the Denotified and “criminal” tribes as OBCs who were not included in categories of either SCs or Scheduled Tribes (STs). It made a clear distinction between “intermediate backward classes” and “depressed backward classes.” The latter was an aggregate, usually of a range of communities whose intermingling with the society was either denied, prohibited and who were even segregated based on the stigma of nomadism attached to them. Most of them were nomadic and wandering tribes like earth-diggers, fishermen, boatmen, palanquin bearers, salt makers, toddy tappers, pig keepers, etc.<sup>38</sup> The National Commission for Denotified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Tribes headed by Balkrishna Sidram Renke, categorically noted that many of these aforementioned communities had been categorized as OBCs but due to their marginalization they gained no benefit.

### Making of an OBC identity

The constitution-making body was the most unrepresented body if we look at the diversity and plurality of the nation and this perhaps was the reason that no full-fledged discussion relating

to backward classes took place as they hardly had any representation from their social background. The only reference that came with the Objective Resolution has already been discussed. The Indian Constitution, however, designated OBCs as Other Backward Classes other than Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. It left a great deal of confusion. While Article 15(4) refers to them as “socially and educationally backward classes,” Article 16(4) mentions them as a “backward class of citizens.” Article 46 of the Indian Constitution mentions “the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of the people,” and Article 340 describes them as “socially and educationally backward classes” (Shah 1997).

The OBCs as category for administrative purpose, however, has been used since colonial times. Although the Maharaja of Kolhapur had recounted to Montagu for upliftment of the backward classes, especially the untouchables, “the backward classes” first acquired a technical meaning in 1918, when the princely state of Mysore constituted a committee to look into the question of representation of backward communities in public services (Galanter 1978). It is largely believed, however, that OBCs are an administrative construct by the post-colonial state for the purpose of governance. But on a careful treatment of history, one realizes that the term OBCs was widely used by the British administration during the colonial rule. Therefore, it is erroneous to believe that it was a product of innovative imagination of the government and state. The term was in usage for administrative purposes. In terms of tracing history one can largely agree with T. K. Oommen who suggests:

The category of OBCs was first formulated by the Depressed Classes and Aboriginal Tribes Committee constituted by the Government of Bombay. The report of the Committee published in 1930 listed some 125 of them belonging to depressed classes and aboriginal tribes, and in 1942 a list of 228 “intermediate communities” consisting of peasant and artisan groups were identified and added to the list. Depressed classes thus constituted the SCs, STs and OBCs, the last being castes intermediate to the twice-born upper castes and those below the pollution line. The specificity of the OBCs can thus be traced to their occupational background—peasant and artisans.<sup>39</sup>

The Government of India Act, 1935, also with provisions in Articles 330, 332 and 334 came up with the provision of political representation of the two depressed categories i.e., the SCs and STs but no such entitlements were conceded for the intermediate groups called OBCs. But their population size as well as their relatively superior position in the caste hierarchy specifically in terms of purity and pollution, perhaps led them to lose out in the benefits from the state unlike the SCs and the STs.<sup>40</sup> But when voting rights were being extended to property-owning and tax-paying males, it was realized that a large mass of Shudra castes who were to be clubbed together under OBCs, were denied that right. Oommen has further delved into contextualizing the whole category of OBCs, particularly *vis-à-vis* the other two categories, SCs and STs.

The case of the OBCs is drastically different both because boundary demarcation cannot be done easily and because the sources of exclusion are different from those that exclude the SCs and STs. The OBCs are above the ritual pollution line within the caste hierarchy, and unlike the SCs, they are not excluded from village social life nor are they culturally distinct like the STs. The OBCs participate in the collective life of the village community without much restriction and share a common culture (language and religion) along with the twice-born caste groups. In spite of this, elite formation among OBCs was slow, and the size of their elite category is disproportionately smaller compared to their numbers within the total population (Oommen 2014).

### **Can there be a Mandal ideology?**

There has been a long-drawn-out debate even within the supporters of affirmative action and reservation regarding the benefits accruing to the beneficiaries of the reservation system in education and employment, especially when the public sector jobs have decreased to a historic low and even the educational sector has been flooded by private players at school, college and university levels. The Mandal Report comes out with an answer to those voicing doubts about the long-term benefits accruing to society by providing a few government jobs through reservation. This is what the report says:

It is not at all our contention that by offering a few thousand jobs to OBC candidates, we shall be able to make 52% of the Indian population as forward. But we must recognize that an essential part of the battle against social backwardness is to be fought in the minds of the backward people. In India, government service has been looked upon as a symbol of prestige and power. By increasing the representation of the OBCs in government services, we give them an immediate feeling of participation in the governance of this country. When a backward class candidate becomes a Collector or a Superintendent of Police, the material benefits accruing from this position are limited to the members of his family only. But the psychological spin-off of this phenomenon is tremendous; the entire community of that backward candidate feels socially elevated. Even when no tangible benefits flow to the community at large, the feeling that now it has its "own man" in the "corridors of power" acts as a morale booster.

*(Second Backward Classes Commission Report 1980)*

A majority of upper-caste intellectuals saw "reservation for OBCs" as an attempt by the government to appease certain caste groups for electoral benefit. Their agony deepened when they realized that the cake was being democratically divided. From mass media to academia, every stakeholder contributed to the atmosphere of anger and despair, to the thinking that India was on the brink of disaster. They were disturbed at the prospect of their monopoly on positions of power and privilege being destroyed by the implementation of reservation for the backward castes. They could not come to terms with the fact that the privileges that were passed down among them, from one generation to the next, would now be redistributed democratically. A popular perception was meticulously created which became a given in the public sphere, that "Mandal" represented a "caste-based privilege to enter government services." V. P. Singh, who took the decision to implement Mandal, had categorically remarked:

Mandal is not just reservation, it is an idea – a humanitarian idea. This has to be understood from a perspective, be implemented and campaigned about, then only justice can be done to Mandal ideology. This has to be clearly understood or else Mandal will get stuck in to a narrow course. The social structure that has developed in our society has been an outcome of a continuous process. A system of caste was established in which one was made polluted and other was made pure and respectful.

*(Singh 2003)*

### **Why was it a silent revolution?**

The process of mobilization for the backward classes' representation and constituting the Backward Classes Commission did result in what is popularly understood as "Mandalization" of

the polity, particularly in northern states. Whether it can be dubbed a revolution or not needs serious academic scrutiny. History is witness to several kinds of revolutions be it the American Revolution, French Revolution or Russian Revolution and so on. There is no denying the fact that each of these revolutions had different circumstances in which they emerged, different ideologies and different victors. Although India did not witness a political revolution as is commonly understood, it did witness a range of social and cultural revolutions in terms of building consciousness.<sup>41</sup> But to many, revolution means a gradual transfer of power, without force or coercion, by those who have always been on the receiving end. Ram Sharan Joshi, a former activist of a left-wing party and journalist, said this about Mandal phenomenon:

It is about claiming one's share and entitlement in power. The process has started, though it has not achieved the desired results. But from Panchayats to the Parliament, if an analysis is done in the post-Mandal period, it is a big revolution. What is a revolution anyway? The transfer of power from the status-quoist point to another point is called revolution. The power was centered amongst the minuscule upper caste people; in the post-Mandal period, it moved towards the deprived classes. This is truth and this is the political revolution that has happened: the power has flowed downwards; leadership has emerged from (the marginalised people); they have become shareholders of power.

(*Joshi 2003*)

The revolution has been interpreted in different terms depending on whether it is by political activists or sociologists. From the sociologists' point of view, it meant a social revolution but as one looks at the political history, it is clear that Mandal dramatically changed the whole constituency of the political class. The demand for social justice might have emerged from below but the implementation of this discourse and its democratization was initiated from above and therefore, it never acquired a spectacular shine that might appear anything like revolution in the popular imagination. It genuinely marked, however, a gradual transfer of power without any force or coercion of any kind by those who have always been deprived of any power in Indian society and polity. To Satish Deshpande, it was a social revolution:

The 1990s were probably the most momentous decade in the life of our republic, and one of its defining events is the social revolution now known simply as "Mandal." The Mandal moment marked the long delayed arrival on the national stage of the critical category of the OBC ... although it might seem rather obvious in retrospect; the first consequence of OBC assertion for the general category was not immediately recognized. It took some time for the realization to sink in that, with the OBCs too being added to the "reserved category," the general category had now become a euphemism for the upper castes. In fact, this had been true since the advent of the Republic because the general category had been comprehensively colonized by the upper castes and OBC participation in it was negligible. Of course, it was this very fact that had triggered the Mandal upsurge in the first place.

(*Deshpande 2014*)

The caste-class debate, however, did not remain restricted to the academic world but it also created vehement fervor in left political circles as their parties' theoretical line saw "caste" as part of the superstructure in Indian society and "economy" as part of the base and for which "class" was of course an appropriate category. But such theory and praxis always encountered an inher-

ent contradiction which is usually taken as a reason for the overall failure of the left politics in India. But then there was always a category of activists who sought a more practical approach to understand the material and social basis of caste in the Indian context. They raised the caste question in their party study circles even at the cost of being branded as “revisionist.” But several of them took a principled and pragmatic position in recognizing the historic role that caste has played in keeping the majority deprived of educational opportunities and chances to better their life. Ram Sharan Joshi, a long-time left activist, recalled:

What we have to clearly understand is that the caste is an integral constituent in the process of ‘class’ formation in India. Those who do not have means of production, who are they? Of course, they are the tribals, Dalits and the backwards who actually constitute the political and economic forces. In 1977–78, I conducted a survey which revealed more than 90% bonded labourers were SCs, STs and OBCs. When I raised the issue of reservation for Dalits and backwards to uplift them in the working committee of the party, I was called a revisionist comrade. I was told everything will be fine once the revolution comes. I responded this was not possible in India: Don’t call this revisionism, it is a silent revolution.

*(Joshi 2003)*

When one looked at this slow and almost invisible transition from close quarters, the change after Mandal was substantive. While the bureaucracy did not reflect that change immediately for obvious reasons, both for inclusion of minuscule numbers of OBCs and that too in phases; the demographic space of polity soon altered with OBCs realizing their electoral dividend as never before. The hegemony of certain upper castes was strongly challenged by the majority Shudras who had been in deep slumber owing to their social and educational backwardness coupled with their low self-esteem due to lack of awareness and most often, cursing themselves and their fate. This change was all-encompassing and that it altered the whole landscape of national parliament and state assemblies (Jaffrelot 2009). Such change is hard to go unnoticed. A celebrated historian, William Dalrymple, saw this change as a democratic revolution:

Ten years ago every second person at any Delhi drinks parties seemed to be either an old school friend of the Prime Minister or a member of his cabinet. Now quite suddenly, no one in Delhi knows anyone in power. A major democratic revolution has taken place almost unnoticed, leaving the urban Anglicized elite on the margins of Indian political landscape. As Mulayam Singh Yadav put it on his elevation to the national cabinet, “For the first time, power has come to the unprivileged and the oppressed and we will use it to ensure that their lot is bettered.” This is also the stated intention of Laloo (Yadav). So far his political success may have done little in concrete terms to boost the welfare of the lower caste poor, but what it certainly has done is to boost their confidence ... Laloo has given them a stake in power and made them politically conscious: exactly as the Civil Rights Movement did for American Blacks in the 1960s.

*(Dalrymple 1998)*

### **OBCs: A category or an identity**

The OBCs, as of now, are more of a category than an identity. A governmental category is created overnight but formation of identity is a historical process and takes its own time based on

circumstances. Furthermore, any identity materializes and matures in a gradual cultural process. It is more of a given name from outside and has not metamorphosed organically like an identity, for “Dalit” has developed with an alternative imagination of the self through cultural and literary manifestations. In historical terms, “Shudra” can be said to be an appropriate aggregation to mean those caste groups which belong to the category called Other Backward Classes. This category has been made to be perceived mostly either to denote “votebank” or a “beneficiary of reservation” in popular parlance. OBCs, therefore, have ended up being more of a political category than a social or a cultural category. As Marc Galanter observed:

the term had never acquired a definitive meaning at the all-India level. There had been no attempt to define it or employ it on the national level and there were no nationwide backward classes’ organizations or spokesmen. It had definitive meanings in local contexts, although these differed somewhat. After the listing of Scheduled Castes, the usage as a synonym for untouchables drops away. Two major species of usage emerge: (i) as the more inclusive group of all those who need special treatment; (ii) as a stratum higher than untouchables but nonetheless depressed. This double usage continues today: the former in the usage of backward classes in the wide sense (including scheduled castes and scheduled tribes); the latter in the usage as equivalent to “other backward classes.

(Galanter 1978)

“*Jiski jitni sankhya bhaari; uski utni bhagedari*”<sup>42</sup> remained one of the important and popular slogans during the Mandal movement which spread among the OBC masses, a realization of their numerical strength and therefore an urge to be represented with respect to their proportion in the populace. No wonder that the proportion of the OBC representatives in the national parliament as well as the state assemblies increased dramatically. But as far as OBC identity is concerned, a consensus has never emerged and has remained mostly fractured. According to Satish Deshpande and Yogendra Yadav, the OBC category has, since the very beginning, remained a contentious issue due to a terrain on which the vexed questions that were posed time and again about the precise relationship between caste and backwardness—and between both these and special treatment from the state had to be decided (Deshpande and Yadav 2006). There was no such rampant confusion in the case of SCs because their backwardness rested on the idea of untouchability and also of the STs owing to their usual spatial separation from mainstream Hindu society and their undisputed poverty.<sup>43</sup>

But Jaffrelot saw how the OBCs soon transformed into at least a social category:

thus, 1990 was marked by exacerbation of the cleavage between upper castes and lower castes, an atmosphere which explains at the time the emotional value of the OBC as a social category ... the OBCs had become a relevant category for the lower castes because they had a vested interest in it, namely the quotas promised by the Mandal Commission report: many of those who were earlier known as “Shudras” internalized this administrative definition of their identity in the early 1990s simply because they thought they could derive benefit from it. However, this category also crystallized because of the attitude of the upper castes who had rejected such reservations in the administration. The cleavage between upper castes and lower castes had suddenly been reinforced by a collective, open hostility from the former and even by the unleashing violence.

(Jaffrelot 2003)

Not that everyone looked comfortable with the ascendance of caste-based reservations in employment. To many, this meant nothing but a populist governmental step lacking any serious logic and thinking. But those who opposed this governmental move failed to realize the potential of the large chunk of the Shudra masses that were gradually pushing democracy to their advantage. The philosophy of “one man one vote” in principle was taking its roots as larger democratization of society. The principle of equality had to be weighed in terms justice, and Mandal at least partially filled that gap in constitutional terms. Rochana Bajpai observed:

The 1990 Mandal debate, most significantly, signaled the ascendance of social justice as a legitimizing norm in its own right. This marked an important shift in justifications of affirmative action in India. Nevertheless, underneath the rhetoric of a ‘share of state power’ for the OBCs, the shift in the normative basis of group preference inaugurated by the Constitution-makers, towards ameliorating disadvantage rather than maintaining distinctness, survived. While claims for OBC quotas emphasized social rather than economic equality, these were substantially social justice arguments: in justificatory terms, these did not represent a triumph of identity.

(Bajpai 2011)

It was this principle of social justice that a wholehearted solidarity for Mandal was extended from the Dalit organizations. Kanshi Ram gave the famous slogan “*mandal ayog laagu karo warna kursi khaali karo*.<sup>44</sup>” Kanshi Ram staged several agitations demanding the implementation of the Mandal Commission Report. These agitations across the country set a momentum that the parties going for the parliamentary general elections included the agenda of implementing the Mandal Recommendations in their manifesto. The National Front government which came to power under the leadership of V. P. Singh fulfilled the promise by announcing the implementation of the Mandal Recommendations on August 7, 1990. From the right wing to the left, all were opposed to their implementation (Hilsayan 2004).

What has further propelled the consolidation of the Shudra masses and their claim for OBC identity in the political sphere, as with the consciousness generated by the Mandal movement, was the realization of the political dividend that they had owing to their population size. The Indian population already was already divided into the categories of SCs, STs and the rest all were categorized as an amorphous “general category.” The creation of a category called OBCs resulted in a shrinking of the general category to merely 15 percent of the Indian populace who comprised castes belonging to the upper three varnas. The term OBCs represented an umbrella aggregate of the Shudras. But an unprecedented unity of this general category transcending their individual caste interest was never as visible as it was in opposing the Mandal Report. Balagopal observed during the hiatus of anti-Mandal agitation:

the entire forward caste community has suddenly become a solid rock. Fundamentalist and secular, Marxist and Gandhian, urban and rural, have all been united as nothing else would ever have united them. They are led by the academics, the whole lot of whom – left, right and centre – have suddenly discovered that the only legitimate division of society is between the talented and the inefficient, and between the rich and the poor ... everybody has suddenly made the unbelievable discovery that there is something called “merit” which has been in possession of the Indian elite all these days, and which is now sought to be destroyed by V P Singh to please the wretched talent-less backward castes and get their votes.

(Balagopal 1990)

What has further propelled a sense of counter-mobilization among the Shudra masses was a mobilization based on a narrow self-centric approach and a bizarre behavior of the upper-caste and upper-class intelligentsia who came together on a single platform setting aside their political and ideological orientations or affiliations. It had always been argued by them that “class” is a foreign import and therefore it was not capable of encapsulating the Indian social condition. But the contradiction between what they wrote and what they felt became obvious. Arvind Narayan Das, a noted social scientist, had observed:

Before Mandal was resurrected, the same sociologists and anthropologists who now wax eloquent on the merits of considering economic criteria laughed at the mention of class. They felt it was a concept which was misplaced in the Indian context and was imported by disgruntled and displaced Marxists who wanted to disturb the harmonious co-existence of jajmani groups performing different social roles evolved through a uniquely Indian historical process.

(Yadav 1994)

This discussion, however, would be incomplete unless we comprehend the role of social science as a discipline and its utility for a larger imagination and transformation of the society which it researches. There are pertinent questions concerning how we have dealt with the study of the social system in India. What is disheartening and worrisome is that the discipline of sociology has remained one of the most elitist disciplines in post-colonial India. Indian classrooms have largely remained sites of upper-class/caste teacher-taught relationships. The backward communities, of course, made exotic subjects of research but these elite sociologists never proposed any prescription for overcoming such backwardness. Yogendra Yadav has befittingly asked:

the sociology written between 1950 and 1990, particularly those written in English, stressed one and only one thing that Indian villages has, a unique and single institution called “caste.” “We at times used to say that there are other things too along with caste.” But in 1990, when Mandal Commission recommendation came these same people said, “please don’t do this, this will divide the nation.” For last forty years you kept on stressing something, when it was being offered practical direction they reverted their position, what kind of justice is this?<sup>45</sup>

The argument that caste is the story of the past and India’s destiny is not cast in stone is the superficial argument of a range of sociologists in the country who interpret the changing nature of caste as the disappearance of caste. Beteille’s contention is that the private TV channel discussions at and around election time create an illusion that caste is an unalterable feature of Indian society, and such consciousness persuades us to believe that caste is India’s destiny (Beteille 2012). Gail Omvedt, however, counters Beteille’s argument saying, to argue that caste is dying and is only surviving based on consciousness generated by media during elections, suggests the fact that the elite social scientists are living in a dream world of their own making. She makes a substantive critique of Beteille’s line with a nuanced theoretical point enriched with empirical examples from Kasegaon relating to purity and pollution and inter-caste marriage.<sup>46</sup> Uma Chakravarty’s critical gaze during the hiatus of the anti-reservation moment brings before us the lived reality of caste in contemporary times:

At the height of anti-Mandal agitation in Delhi, spearheaded by “upper” caste students and legitimized by prominent sociologists of University of Delhi, I was struck by a photograph prominently displayed in a newspaper showing women college students

in Delhi demonstrating in the streets. They were carrying placards that read “We don’t want unemployed husbands!” The irony of this statement was lost on most readers of English language newspapers – almost all upper caste themselves – who widely shared the ideology of these protesters … what placards were saying was that these girls would be deprived of upper caste IAS husbands. But what they were also saying was that the OBCs and Dalits who would now occupy these positions in the IAS could *never* be their potential husbands.<sup>47</sup>

### Post-Mandal scenario

An important aspect to be understood in the post-Mandal era is the social engineering carried out by the Sangh Parivar and its political outfit, the Bharatiya Janata Party. Without unsettling its own ideological structure, it looked at the possibility of extending representation to the backward communities and later incorporated it as a part of an integral strategy for spreading its ideology. Initially, the Sangh Parivar vehemently opposed the Mandal report implementation, which they had argued would divide society, and hence endanger national unity and integrity. With the changing nature of the polity, they realized the electoral potential of a large chunk of Shudras now known as OBCs; therefore, they started to accommodate them in rank and file of their organizations and extended leadership positions to a few.<sup>48</sup> Representation is mere representation; this is helpful for the community as a whole only when the representation finds the right space in the structure of ideology (Chamadia 2014). Anil Chamadia, a noted journalist, has recently observed:

The political upheaval generated by the recommendations of Mandal Commission has raised the consciousness that the backward community must get a share in handling the power politics of this nation. Though this politics was pushed, no doubt by the fragmented leadership of various backward castes, the real benefits of this have been appropriated by the Sangh Parivar. The agendas which are developed in parliamentary politics for a short term goal are often used and championed by ideological organizations for a long term benefit. (Chamadia 2014)

### Summing up

A common charge is that “OBC” is not a homogenous category, neither “SC” as a category. While SCs as a category took shape on the basis of purity–pollution dichotomy emphasizing the “untouchability” issue, one is aware of the empirical social reality that there exists clear-cut hierarchy even among those various castes categorized as SCs and also that there are many caste groups that belong to the OBCs category but face a similar humiliating experience of untouchability and other social sanctions. No social category, therefore, can be homogenous in the true sense. The categorization of many Muslim castes/biradaris as OBCs by the Mandal Report gave the impetus to a whole “social movement” or mobilization called the “Pasmanda Movement.” Mandal strengthened the whole discourse of social justice. This created an unprecedented sense of confidence and self-esteem among the OBCs. Earlier, there was an apparent “fear of collapsibility”<sup>49</sup> among the various Shudra caste groups as they suffered a kind of stigma attached to their caste names and associated occupations.

It is intriguing that those who entered bureaucracy with the help of the Mandal-I reservation and benefited socially, were co-opted by the system and thus, this segment of the OBCs failed to contribute in creating consciousness as was done by the Dalit bureaucracy. Once their

middle-class aspirations were fulfilled, the OBC bureaucrats neither had the leisure nor the commitment to think about the caste/community to which they belonged. This has prevented the spread of consciousness which is crucial in identity formation. Mandal-II is quite promising in terms of building the intellectual vacuum that has been created as now the OBC students are entering institutions of higher learning. But most importantly, what has been realized in the two decades or so since Mandal is that the growing participation of Dalits and OBC communities, and competition in the domain of democratic politics has indeed created a crisis for the erstwhile dominant groups. They had, for a long time, taken their power for granted and now are feeling extremely resentful about change and democratization (Jodhka 2015).

### Notes

- 1 The Government of Bihar has declared August 25 to be a day of state honor to commemorate the birth anniversary of the messiah of social justice since 1992. On June 1, 2001, the state government also issued a postage stamp in his memory.
- 2 Mr Shirres was the SDO of Madhepura subdivision. The school was named after him and popularly called the Shirres Institute.
- 3 Shivnandan Prasad Mandal, belonging to Madhepura, was a noted Congress leader during the late years of colonial rule. After independence, he went on to become the first law minister in the cabinet of Shri Krishna Singh, the first Chief Minister of Bihar. A high school and another law college named after him are located in Madhepura district town.
- 4 In the 1920s, many caste organizations worked for increasing consciousness relating to their caste identity as peasants belonging to Shudra castes on every conceivable occasion had to pay some amount or give goods to the zamindar and others in the feudal hierarchy. For instance, Yadavs and Koeris had to supply milk and vegetables, respectively, free of cost. In Bihar, the Yadav Mahasabha, the Koeri Mahasabha and the Kurmi Mahasabha, later merged to make a “Triveni Sangh.” See Yadav (1994, p. 37).
- 5 See *Anand Bazar Patrika*, Calcutta, 1908.
- 6 There are several *Kabirpanthi ashrams* in and around Murho, Belo and Madhepura even today.
- 7 Ibid., p. 24.
- 8 Surendra Jha “Suman” was an MLA from 1972–5; later he became the Member of Parliament representing Darbhanga constituency on a Janta Party ticket in 1977.
- 9 It was used as a proverb indicating to insult the Brahmin legislator who had a passed casteist remark against B. P. Mandal. See Shyamal Kishore Yadav edited B. P. Mandal Rajkiya Jayanti Samaroh Smarika, Madhepura, 1998, pp. 10–11.
- 10 Ram Manohar Lohia, himself mentioned Madhepura in many of his speeches as a real laboratory of Socialism due to its allegiance with B. N. Mandal, the saint of practicing socialism.
- 11 Ram Manohar Lohia spoke in a public meeting in Madhepura. See, Bhupendra Narayan Yadav “Madhepuri,” *Boond Boond Sach Ek Sagar Ka*, Kaushiki Chhetra Hindi Sahitya Sammelan, Madhepura, p.118 (Translation Mine)  
Until 1967 Madhepura was not an independent Lok Sabha constituency. The entire Madhepura subdivision was in Saharsa Lok Sabha.
- 12 Until 1967 Madhepura was not an independent Lok Sabha constituency. The entire Madhepura subdivision was in Saharsa Lok Sabha.
- 13 Ibid., p. 53.
- 14 *Shoshit* literally means “depressed” and *Dal* means “party.” This political formation, as is suggested by the very nomenclature of the party, stood for the depressed and exploited class not just in terms of the constituency they represented but also the leadership themselves. B. P. Mandal formed Shoshit Dal in 1967 with some 25 former members of Samyukta Vidhayak Dal.
- 15 In a personal interview conducted in January 2014 with Suresh Mistri who had a long association with B. P. Mandal, who worked as his personal driver.
- 16 The Praja Socialist Party founded in 1954 merged with the Socialist Party launched by Ram Manohar Lohia in 1956 to make the Samyukta Socialist Party in 1964.
- 17 Only Chaudhary Brahm Prakash preceded him in this regard. He was Chief Minister of Delhi between March 1952 and February 1955 representing the Indian National Congress.

- 18 Satish Singh was an MLA of *Shoshit-Dal* and belonged to a Shudra caste, namely *Kurmi*. He was technically the first backward Chief Minister, but it was a temporary arrangement to clear the way for B. P. Mandal, the leader of the legislative party.
- 19 Ibid., p. 78.
- 20 Ibid., p. 25.
- 21 B. K. Burman headed the Department of Anthropology, Vishwa Bharti, M. N. Srinivas, an eminent sociologist, Yogendra Singh was at Centre for Study of Social Systems, Jawaharlal Nehru University and M. S. A. Rao was at the Department of Sociology, University of Delhi. Other members of the expert committee included: Indra Deva of the Department of Sociology, Ravishankar University, Raipur, Mohammad Anas of Aligarh Muslim University, Moin Shakar of Marathwada University, Pradhan H. Prasad, of A. N. Sinha Institute of Social Studies, Patna, J. S. Yadava of Indian Institute of Mass Communications, New Delhi and R. K. Sharma of the Centre of Study of Regional Development, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.
- 22 These are the opening lines of the Second Backward Classes Commission Report, Government of India, New Delhi.
- 23 Second Backward Classes Commission Report, New Delhi, 1980, p.x. Also see *Mandal Vichar*, April–July, 2008, 12–13.
- 24 See Upendra Baxi in the preface written for Anirudh Prasad's *Reservation Policy and Practice in India: A Means to An End*, Deep and Deep Publications, New Delhi, 1991, p. xviii
- 25 The headquarters of National Commission for Backward Classes is located at Trikoot-1, Bhikaji Cama Place, New Delhi. While the office has housed copies of the First Backward Classes Commission popularly known as Kaka Kalelkar Report whose recommendations were never adopted by the Government of India, it is stunning that this office does not have a single copy of the Second Backward Classes Commission Report popularly known as Mandal Report, that was adopted by the United Front Government headed by Vishwanath Pratap Singh.
- 26 See V. P. Singh's interview with Sudhir Hilsayan published in *Mandal Vichar*, Delhi and Madhepura, September, 2004, p. 45.
- 27 Ibid., p. 41.
- 28 Ibid., p. 6.
- 29 *Dhobis* (washerman), *Telis* (oil-presser) for instance remained the same while *Gwala* (cattle herder/milkman) became *Ghosi* and *Koeri* (vegetable-grower) became *Kunjra*.
- 30 A noted Dalit Bhaujan intellectual however sees leather making as an act of sophisticated technology and therefore calls them “Subaltern-Scientists.” For details see, Kancha Ilaiah's *Post Hindu India: A Discourse in Dalit-Bahujan, Socio-Spiritual and Scientific Revolution*, Sage Publications, New Delhi, 2009.
- 31 The University of Delhi administration had introduced a Four Year Undergraduate program from the 2012–13 sessions. It has been reversed since the 2014–15 session after a sustained protest by students and teachers.
- 32 Kumkum Roy in a panel discussion as part of the conference titled “The Caste Question and the Historian's Craft” on February 28, 2014, at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi.
- 33 Ibid., p. 57.
- 34 See for details, B. R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, Critical Quest, New Delhi, 2007.
- 35 Sharad Patil, “Should ‘Class’ Be the Basis for Recognizing Backwardness?”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, December 15, 1990, p. 2733. Even newer formulation by scholars like Anand Teltumbde suggests that caste is very much embedded in class in the Indian social structure. “Caste nested in Class” is his recent expression.
- 36 The Indira Sawhney and Others vs Union case is popularly known as the “Mandal Judgment.” It was a nine-judge constitution bench presided over by the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. The Court pronounced a 5:3:1 majority judgment presided over M. H. Kania on November 15, 1992, which ultimately cleared the obstacles in implementation of the recommendations of the Mandal Report.
- 37 See Imtiaz Ahmed edited *Caste and Social Stratification among Muslims in India*.
- 38 Second Backward Classes Commission Report, Government of India, New Delhi, 1980, pp.229–30. The case of Depressed Backward Classes was made in the dissent note written by L. R. Naik as a rejoinder to the main report. Also, see the Report of National Commission for Denotified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Tribes, Government of India, New Delhi, 2008, pp.5–6.
- 39 T. K. Oommen, *Social Inclusion in Independent India: Dimensions and Approaches*, Orient Blackswan, New Delhi, 2014, p.99. While tracing the history of OBCs, Oommen also suggest that their very social

- location partly explains why the mobilization of the OBCs is mainly aimed at economic and political entitlement and not so much on their cultural and social transformation.
- 40 Ibid., p. 99.
- 41 See for instance B. R. Ambedkar's *Revolution and Counter Revolution in Ancient India*, drambedkarwas.files.wordpress.com accessed on October 30, 2015.
- 42 This literal meaning of the slogan is that people should have their representation proportional to their numerical strength.
- 43 There exists huge confusion regarding categories of SCs and STs and internal conflicts within these categories among various castes and subcastes are quite evident, but these categories have gathered enough legitimacy over a long period of time. Gopinath Munde, a member of the Lok Sabha emphasized that like SC is a class category, ST is a class category, OBC also is a class category and each of these "classes" are comprised of various "castes." He further emphasized that caste is organically linked to backwardness and vice versa. Munde spoke on the caste-based census in Lok Sabha Debate (May 6, 2010, at 15:50)
- 44 Ibid., p. 398.
- 45 Yogendra Yadav in an address to BAMCEF national meeting held in New Delhi, December 19, 2001.
- 46 Gail Omvedt, "Andre Beteille's Dream World: Caste Today," countercurrents.org, March 20, 2012, accessed on October 31, 2015.
- 47 Uma Chakravarti, *Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens*, Stree, Kolkata, 2006, p.1. The prominent sociologists who have been referred to included M. N. Srinivas, Andre Beteille and Veena Das who compared the government's decision of the implementation of the Mandal Commission Report with South African apartheid. It is ironic to note here that one of these above three sociologists headed an expert research team for the study of this commission. See Rochana Bajpai, *Debating Difference: Group Rights and Liberal Democracy in India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2011, p. 230.
- 48 A long list of Bhartiya Janta Party leaders emerged in this period from the OBC category at national as well as state level, like Kalyan Singh, Uma Bharti, Vinay Katiyar, Narendra Modi, Shivraj Singh Chauhan and Gopinath Munde to name a few.
- 49 This phrase is borrowed from Douglas E. Goodfriend who saw this among the occupational caste groups among Muslims of old Delhi. See Imtiaz Ahmed (Ed.) *Modernization and Social Change Among Muslims in India*, (1983).

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# 12

## THE OTHER BACKWARD CLASSES

### Pre- and post-Mandal India

*Simhadri Somanaboina*

The acceptance for the implementation of the Mandal Commission report that envisaged social justice for more than half of the country's population, namely the marginalized people categorized as "Other Backward Classes," is considered as one of the momentous moments in the life of India. "Heralding a new era by pushing, though meekly, over 52 per cent of country's population into the national mainstream, this was perhaps the third greatest event of the present times after the declaration of Independence (15 August 1947) and adoption of the Constitution (26 January 1950)," says K. C. Yadav, in his book *India's Unequal Citizens*.

On August 7, 1990, V. P. Singh the then Prime Minister of India, made an announcement in the Parliament that his government had decided to implement the 27 percent reservation for Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in services as recommended by the Mandal Commission Report. The socially inclusive measure of reservation sparked a hostile reaction from the dominant castes. The unprecedented campaign against reservation gave rise to a national movement uniting the lower castes. It also divided almost all the democratic institutions such as political parties, legislature, executive, media, scientific institutions, universities, engineering and medical professions and civil societal organizations.

All that was built up as part of the Indian nation was on a warpath protesting against the reservation for inclusion of OBCs in the services. This, in fact, was an eye-opener for all the aspiring classes who thought these institutions and ideologies were fighting backwardness and poverty. It also opened up the idea of India for new interpretations. The nationalist rhetoric and progressive possibilities were all thrown into turmoil and it set about redefining the institutions and ideologies. Perhaps that was the best thing that happened to India. The Mandal movement showed a clear departure in taking subalterns to a position where caste emerged as the major methodological discourse in understanding and transforming Indian politics.

The OBC reservations issue resurfaced once again in 2015 and this development was in the background of the Hindutva majoritarian party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) coming to power at the national level under the leadership of Narendra Modi in 2014. During the Bihar elections in October–November 2015, the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh (RSS) chief, Mohan Bhagwat,

pitched for a review of the reservation policy, contending it has been used for political ends and suggested setting up of an apolitical committee to examine who needs the

facility and for how long. He said though “interest groups” do get formed in democracy the aspirations of one section should not be met at the cost of the others.

(*Deccan Chronicle, September 21, 2015*)

The RSS is the parent organization of the BJP. Another RSS ideologue, M. G. Vaidya, echoed the RSS chief. He said, “There is no need for caste-based reservation now because no caste remained backward. At the most, continue it for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, but only for 10 years. Abolish completely after that” (Soni Misra 2016, p. 30). Laloo Prasad Yadav, former Chief Minister of Bihar, accepted the challenge of Mohan Bhagwat and said the election would be a battle between forwards and backwards. He and his coalition of parties of backward people won and formed the government in Bihar.

In the present context, the BJP, the political wing of the RSS, heads the central government and the RSS view on reservations has implications for the 52 percent of the OBC population and SCs and STs, who make up almost 25 percent of the country’s population. The issues being raised by the new powerholders are three: Firstly, should be reservations be continued; secondly, reservations at whose cost, implying that the OBCs, SCs and STs were grabbing opportunities and depriving others, namely, the “general” category or the forward castes; thirdly, the very basis of reservation, namely caste, is being questioned. Another new development is that the developed castes like Patidars of Gujarat, Jats of Haryana and Kapus of Andhra are also demanding reservations citing fairness and justice. From these developments, it seems that there is an orchestrated move against OBC reservations. However, this is nothing new since opposition to reservations has been consistent, right from the 1950s when Parliament was forced to amend the constitution for the first time as a result of Periyar-led agitation in Tamil Nadu against the scrapping of reservations for the non-Brahmin Hindus that had been implemented since colonial times in the Madras Presidency.

This chapter discusses if and how the Indian State has fulfilled the constitutional requirement to investigate the conditions of the socially and educationally backward classes and take measures to improve their conditions. The chapter examines themes such as the status of the OBCs, various perspectives on identifying OBCs, the commissions constituted to study and recommend measures for their development, the judicial response to such recommendations of the various commissions and the responses from political parties, intelligentsia, media and civil society.

## **OBCs employed in various sectors**

### ***Central government***

As of August 1, 2014, the total employees of the Government of India constituted 3,084,530, of whom 87,960 belonged to Group A services, 76,724 to Group B, 113,477 to Group C and 2,806,369 to Group D. The total sanctioned posts are 3,684,543 (Table 12.1).

While making an announcement in the Parliament on August 7, 1990, about the implementation of the 27 percent reservation for OBCs, the then Prime Minister V. P. Singh had said that the OBCs constituted a mere 4.7 percent in Group A services of India. This increased to 6.9 percent in 2011 according to the statement made by the Minister for Personnel in the Parliament. According to the annual report of the Department of Personnel and Training, this figure further increased to 11.11 percent by January 2013 (Table 12.2).

In Group B services, the situation was similar: The OBCs constituted a mere 10.63 percent. Not even a single OBC Group A officer is found in the President’s secretariat. Out of the 651

### *The other backward classes*

*Table 12.1 Employees of Central Government*

<i>Category of group</i>	<i>Total sanctioned posts</i>	<i>Total</i>
A (Gazetted)	100,869	87,960
B (Gazetted)	86,840	76,724
C (Non-gazetted)	144,454	113,477
D (Non-gazetted)	3,352,380	2,806,369
Total	3,684,543	3,084,530

Source: Statement of Minister of State (Finance) in Lok Sabha on August 1, 2014, *Forward Press*, January 2016.

*Table 12.2 Representation of OBCs, SCs and STs in Group A & B Posts of 55 Central Government Departments (as on January 1, 2013)*

<i>Post</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>OBC</i>	<i>SC</i>	<i>ST</i>
Group A	74,866	8,316 (11.11%)	10,434 (13.94%)	4,354 (5.82%)
Group B	188,776	20,069 (10.63%)	29,373 (15.56%)	12,073 (6.4%)

Source: DoPT Annual Report 2014–15), compiled by Rajeev Suman, *Forward Press*, January 2016.

*Table 12.3 Caste-wise Breakdown of Teaching Faculty in IIT Bombay (September 24, 2012)*

<i>S. No.</i>	<i>Teaching staff</i>	<i>General</i>	<i>OBC</i>	<i>SC</i>	<i>ST</i>
1	Professor	223	0	0	0
2	Associate professor	118	2	1	0
3	Assistant professor	120	3	0	0

Source: M. P. Singh, RTI Activist, compiled by Rajeev Suman, *Forward Press*, January 2016.

staff of the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC), 9 percent belong to OBCs (*Forward Press*, January 1, 2016, p.33). This picture speaks volumes about the social exclusionary practices in the Indian administrative services and their institutions.

Table 12.3 reveals that the employment position of OBCs, along with Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs), is quite pathetic in the Indian Institute of Technology, Bombay, a premier educational institution in the country. The caste-wise break-up of the teaching faculty in the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Bombay, gives an impression that there are no marginalized people (SC, ST, OBC) in this country. There are no professors from these communities out of 223 professors on the rolls; as for the positions of Associate Professors and Assistant Professors, out of a total of 238 positions there are three belonging to the OBCs and SCs. There is no ST faculty in any of the three categories.

The scenario is similar in Gail (India) Limited, a leading public sector undertaking (Table 12.4). Out of a total of 92 positions in the top management, there are just three officers from

Table 12.4 Caste-wise Breakdown of Top Management in Gail (India) Limited—Public Sector Undertaking (March 13, 2015)

SI. No.	Designation	General	OBC	SC	ST
1	Chief managing director	1	0	0	0
2	Director	5	0	0	0
3	Executive director	21	0	1	1
4	General manager	65	1	0	0

Source: Mahendra Pratap Singh, RTI Activist, compiled by Rajeev Suman, *Forward Press*, January 2016.

the OBCs, SCs and STs. We can safely assume that a similar situation exists in other educational institutions supported by the central government and leading public sector undertakings. This exclusion shows how callous the Indian social system has been with regard to the backward classes. It appears worse than apartheid, that was practiced in South Africa. How can the mainstream political parties and anti-Mandal forces justify their undemocratic movement, crying hoarse that development, efficiency, unity, etc., were being undermined by the efforts that aim at setting right this injustice and pluralizing democracy, which is a constitutional mandate?

Table 12.5 analyzes the employment scenario of OBCs, SCs and STs across 18 public sector banks for the year 2015. The analysis is at the level of General Manager and Deputy General Manager who are involved in decision-making policy and implementation that involves lakhs of crores of rupees. At the General Manager level, OBCs comprise 1.1 percent and at the Deputy General Manager level 1.15 percent. The position of SCs and STs is not any better. In fact, entrepreneurs in business and industry, apart from other economic activities, are the real beneficiaries of the access to banks and their policies. The backward classes are totally socially disconnected with the banks and they do not figure or participate in decision making. The kind of exclusion the backward classes face in the banking sector is quite unimaginable and a nation cannot afford to justify such a scenario.

The picture is similar in the judiciary. The Supreme Court too is not representative of castes and communities (Table 12.6). It is predominantly forward caste in character. There is very poor representation of SCs and STs while the OBCs' representation is minimal. In the absence of reservation in the judiciary OBCs, SCs and STs are almost excluded from it so it is not wrong to conclude that this would be true of High Courts and lower courts. The Brahmins and other forward castes disproportionately occupy the judiciary leading to the monoculturization of the judiciary. Democracy is strengthened only when all its institutions—judiciary, legislature and bureaucracy—promote plurality and participation of all peoples and communities, preferably in proportion to their population.

Table 12.7 shows the OBC reservation scenario in different states and union territories of the country. Almost all states implement reservations but in different percentages; some union territories do not implement reservations as they do not have an OBC population, according to central government. Tamil Nadu provides the highest percentage of OBC reservation. The BJP-ruled states like Gujarat, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh and Bharatiya Janata Dal-ruled Odisha provide OBC reservation only in services but not in educational institutions. Although the figures reflect the policy on paper, whether it is being implemented on the ground in recruitment in accordance with the policy is debatable.

*The other backward classes*

Table 12.5 Representation of OBC, SC and ST Employees in Public Sector Banks (October 1, 2015)

	Total	OBC	SC	ST	Total	OBC	SC	ST
Allahabad Bank	19	0	0	0	63	0	6	0
Andhra Bank	16	0	0	0	48	0	2	1
Bank of Baroda	44	1	1	0	122	1	5	2
Bank of India	37	0	1	1	126	1	9	2
Bank of Maharashtra	11	0	0	0	36	0	0	0
Canara Bank	42	0	2	0	97	1	12	3
Central Bank of India	27	0	1	0	71	1	5	0
Corporation Bank	20	0	0	0	61	0	1	0
Dena Bank	13	0	0	1	39	0	7	1
Indian Bank	18	3	1	0	56	8	6	2
Indian Overseas Bank	26	0	1	2	71	0	4	1
Oriental Bank of Commerce	21	0	0	0	63	0	3	0
Punjab & Sind Bank	12	0	0	0	11	0	0	0
Punjab National Bank	42	0	1	1	131	0	0	0
Syndicate Bank	25	0	4	0	48	0	1	0
UCO Bank	21	0	1	0	48	0	4	1
Union Bank of India	29	1	1	1	84	2	6	2
United Bank of India	13	0	0	1	41	0	1	1
Vijaya Bank					Data yet to be received			
Total	436	5	14	7	1216	14	18	16
Percentage		1.10%	3.20%	1.60%		1.15%	5.92%	1.30%

Source: All India Federation of Other Backward Classes: Employers' Welfare Association, compiled by Rajeev Suman, *Forward Press*, January 2016.

Table 12.6 Caste Representation in Supreme Court

Caste	1950–70 (%)	1971–89 (%)	1950–89 (%)
Brahmin	40.0	45.2	42.9
Other Forward Castes	57.1	42.9	49.4
Other Backward Classes	2.9	6.8	5.2
Scheduled Castes	0.0	4.6	2.6
Scheduled Tribes	0.0	0.0	0.0

Source: Gadbois Jr, 2011 (*Jindal Journal of Public Policy*) in Ravindra Meena, *Forward Press*, January 2016.

### Reservations in pre-independence period

The history of reservations goes back to pre-independence times in India. In 1851, the revenue board of Madras Presidency issued an order to the district collectors that “they should be careful to see that subordinate appointments in their districts were not monopolized by a few influential families. As far as possible, these should be divided among the principal castes.” Further W. R. Cornish, Census Superintendent of the Presidency, observed that

Table 12.7 State-wise Pattern of OBC Reservation

S. No.	State/Union territory	Reservation quota for OBCs
1	Andhra Pradesh	27% (BC-A: 7%, BC-B: 10%, BC-C: 1%, BC-D: 7%, BC-E: 4%)
2	Arunachal Pradesh	No OBC population
3	Assam	27% in jobs
4	Bihar	33% (BC I: 12%, BCII: 18%, OBC women: 3%)
5	Chhattisgarh	14% in jobs
6	Delhi	27%
7	Goa	19.5% (An increase to 27% approved)
8	Gujarat	27% in jobs
9	Haryana	27% in Class III & IV jobs and 10% in Class I and II jobs
10	Himachal Pradesh	18% in Class III & IV jobs and 12% in Class I & II jobs
11	J & K	2% for real OBCs, (ALC 3%, backward areas 20%)
12	Jharkhand	14%
13	Karnataka	32%
14	Kerala	40%
15	Madhya Pradesh	14%
16	Maharashtra	21 % (Spl. BCs: 2%, OBCs: 19%)
17	Manipur	17%
18	Meghalaya	No OBC population
19	Mizoram	No OBC population
20	Nagaland	No OBC population
21	Odisha	27% in jobs
22	Punjab	12% in jobs, 5% in educational institutions.
23	Rajasthan	21% in jobs
24	Sikkim	21% in jobs
25	Tamil Nadu	OBCs: 26.5%, Muslim OBCs: 3.5%, EBCs/DNT and communities. 29%
26	Telangana	29% (BC-A: 7%, BC-B: 10%, BC-C: 1%, BC-D: 7%, BC- E: 4%)
27	Tripura	None
28	Uttar Pradesh	26%
29	Uttarakhand	14%
30	West Bengal	17% in jobs
31	Andaman & Nicobar	38%
32	Chandigarh	27% in jobs
33	Daman & Diu	27% in jobs
34	Dadra & Nagar Haveli	5% in jobs
35	Lakshadweep	None as the entire population is Muslim STs
36	Pondicherry	MBC 20%, OBC 13%, Backward Tribe 1%, total 34%

Source: *Forward Press*, January 2016.

It is not to the advantage of the Government that every question connected with the progress of the country should be viewed through the medium of Brahmin spectacles. The true policy of the State would be to limit their numbers in official positions and to encourage a large proportion of Non-Brahmin Hindus and Muslims to enter official service so as to allow no special pre-eminence or preponderance of a particular caste.

(Yadav 1994, p. 124)

This approach was further strengthened by providing opportunities for “Depressed Classes,” a term that was then in use for the marginalized people. Sahu Maharaj of Kolhapur, on July 26, 1902, issued orders reserving 50 percent to non-Brahmins. The Maharaja of Mysore also implemented reservations from 1921 and the Bombay Presidency from 1925.

The pro-reservation policies of the Justice Party government in the Madras Presidency paved the way for reservations across India. The Madras government issued a Government Order (GO) in 1921 to provide opportunities in services for non-Brahmins. In 1922, reservations were extended to promotions and again in 1927, a Communal Order was issued giving reservations to all communities in the following proportion: Non-Brahmin Hindus (42 percent), Brahmins (17 percent), Muslims (17 percent), Anglo-Indians (17 percent) and Depressed Classes (8 percent). After independence, a revised reservation policy was announced in 1947 by giving reservations to non-Brahmin Hindus, 43 percent; Backward Hindus, 14 percent; Brahmanas, 14 percent; Scheduled Castes, 14 percent, Anglo-Indians and Christians, 8 percent and Muslims, 7 percent (Yadav 1994, pp. 128–9). This GO was challenged in the court of law, and it was struck down by the Madras High Court and later the Supreme Court confirmed it. Periyar E.V. Ramasami called the constitution a Brahmana document and demanded a separate Dravidanadu. The movement led by Periyar forced the Nehru Government to go for the First Constitutional Amendment in 1951, incorporating Article 15(4) providing reservations in education for SCs, STs and Socially and Educationally Backward Classes.

### **Concept of OBCs and constituent assembly debate**

Jawaharlal Nehru used the phrase “other backward classes” in the first speech he made on December 13, 1946, before the Constituent Assembly and announced that “special measures were to be taken in favor of minorities, backward and tribal areas and depressed and other backward classes.”

The subcommittee on fundamental rights recommended that “The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth” and that there should be “equality of opportunity for all citizens in matters of public employment.” Ambedkar suggested an amendment whereby the proposal would not “prevent the Government from prescribing a certain proportion of posts of public service for the minorities – whoever they may be.” Thus, the Constituent Assembly voted for Article 16(4) (Jaffrelot 2003, pp. 215–16). Article 16(4) says:

Nothing in this article shall prevent the State from making any provision for the reservation of appointments or posts in favour of any backward class of citizens which, in the opinion of the State, is not adequately represented in the services under the State.

(Acharya 2015, p. 24)

Loknath Misra argued against it as it would put “a premium on backwardness and inefficiency.” Damodar Swarup argued for deletion of clause as “it appears just and reasonable but it is wrong in principle.” Further, he said that the term “backward” was not easy to define nor was it easy to “find a suitable criterion for testing the backwardness of a community or class.” He argued that if accepted, “it would give rise to casteism and favouritism, which should not find a place in a secular state” (Mandal Commission Report, vol. III, p. 65).

Ari Bahadur Gurung felt that the term “backward” should be defined by the House. R. M. Nalavade preferred the words “Scheduled Castes” against “backward classes.” Dharam Prakash

also preferred “depressed class” or “scheduled class” against “backward class” as it would give a definite meaning. He felt that “backward” class had yet to be defined and there was “no possibility of its being defined in the near future.” He therefore supported the amendment that the words “backward class” be substituted by “scheduled caste.” Chandrika Ram suggested adding the words “Scheduled Castes” after the words “Backward Classes”: “He pleaded that since Harijans enjoyed provisions for reservation in services, there should be similar provisions for backward classes also.” V. I. Muniswamy Pillay expressed that the word backward had not been defined properly. While arguing against the anti-reservationists, he said, so long as the communal canker remained, reservation for communities would be necessary. T. Channiah favored reservation extended to 150 years to equalize a period they had been deprived of opportunities. Santanu Kumar Das preferred reservation to continue as long as such conditions prevailed as to make people remain backward (Mandal Commission Report, Vol. III, p. 66).

T.T. Krishnamachari asked, what would be the criteria for determining who was “backward.” He thought that the Drafting Committee produced a “paradise for lawyers” as the issue would have to be ultimately decided by the Supreme Court (Mandal Commission Report, Vol III, p. 67).

B. R. Ambedkar, in his reply to the criticisms against draft Article 10(3) justified inclusion of the word “backward” as “the Drafting Committee had to produce a formula which would reconcile opposing points of view … no better formula could be produced than the one that is embodied in subclause (3) of Article 10.” He further pointed out,

Unless you use some such qualifying phrase as “backward” the exception made in favour of reservation will ultimately eat up the rule altogether … that I think … is the justification why the Drafting Committee undertook on its own shoulders the responsibility of introducing the word “backward” which, I admit, did not originally find a place in the fundamental right in the way in which it was passed by this assembly.

Finally, he referred to two questions which had been raised during the debate in the Assembly *viz.*, definition of “backward community” and justiciability of Clause 3 of the draft article. As regards the former he stated, “anyone who reads the language of the draft itself will find that we have left it to be determined by each local Government. A backward community is a community which is backward in the opinion of the Government.” Regarding the justiciability, he observed, “it is rather difficult to give a dogmatic answer. Personally, I think it would be a justiciable matter” (Mandal Commission Report, Vol. III, p. 76). It was adopted by the assembly without any amendment and subsequently the Drafting Committee renumbered it as Article 16(4).

Panjabrao Deshmukh introduced an amendment, all the “classes and communities” of India would be represented within the administration according their numeric strength. He also observed that the “Assembly was going to exclude the backward classes simply because they have not formed themselves into one group or agitated” (Jaffrelot 2003, pp. 218–19).

B. R. Ambedkar, while resigning from the Union Cabinet, stated that the backward classes were not provided any safeguards in the constitution and the commission to look into the conditions of backward classes was also not appointed.

## **OBC reservations and political/government response in pre-Mandal India**

### ***The First Backward Classes Commission (Kaka Kalelkar Commission) 1953–5***

The First Backward Classes Commission was appointed by the President as mandated in the Article 340 of the constitution with 11 persons under the chairmanship of Kaka Kalelkar on January 29, 1953. The terms of reference for the Commission were: a) Determine criteria to be adopted in considering whether any section of people should be treated as socially and educa-

tionally backward classes and prepare list of such classes. b) Investigate the conditions of all such socially and educationally backward classes and the difficulties under which they labor and make recommendations to the steps that should be taken. The Commission justified in interpreting the terms of reference as mainly relating to social hierarchy based on caste. The following criteria were devised to identify backwardness:

1. Low social position in the traditional caste hierarchy of Hindu society.
2. Lack of general educational advancement among the major section of a caste or community.
3. Inadequate or no representation in government service.
4. Inadequate representation in the field of trade, commerce and industry.

The lists of OBCs published by Education Ministry, Government of India, and the lists furnished by the state governments among others form the basis for the classification of communities. The Commission recommended that the caste was the main cause of the social backwardness of the OBCs and identified 2,399 castes with a population of 11.51 crores (32 percent) as OBCs.

The Commission, by and large, identified the problems confronted by the backward classes largely in terms of community occupations. The centrality of the village to these occupations *vis-à-vis* the economic modernization that the state resorted to, resulting in the redundancy of their occupations, has been captured by the report. Most of the problems that the communities suffer from appear to emanate from Western-centric industrialization and economic thinking. The report focusses a large number of recommendations around skilling and incentivizing cottage industry, protection of cottage and rural industries from competition of the mills and factories, policy prescription towards economic sustainability of community occupations, land ceiling and redistribution, restricting absentee landlords, cooperativization of institutions, resource development and an emphasis on occupations viewed as inferior.

The report suggested special help for communities whose traditional occupation was personal services such as washerman, barbers and providing settled life to the nomadic communities and inculcating the concept of dignity among communities traditionally involved in begging. Further, the report suggested that the ultimate solution to prevent exploitation of the backward classes would be to ensure that all production and distribution would be on a socialist basis. Though the report tried to touch upon most of the backward classes the treatment appeared to be general in nature.

The report was emphatic about a caste census and recommended enumeration of a caste census and that it should be done in 1957 itself, if possible, or if not, in the next census of 1961. The commission felt that “as long as social welfare and social relief have to be administered through caste, classes or groups, full information about these groups should be obtained and tabulated.” The report saw backwardness of the backward classes as due to social, economic, environmental and political reasons but extension of the principle of reservation of seats in the legislature for other backward classes will have far reaching repercussions, generating disruption and disunity.

In another context, the Commission observed that

Some of the representatives of the advanced classes in North Indian States expressed the fear that the reservations of seats for backward classes might perpetuate casteism and that the privilege once granted could not be withdrawn later. The opposite is unfortunately the case. It is casteism that is keeping the backward classes from participation in administrative services.

*(Chaurasia and Kalelkar 1956, p. 150)*

The Commission analyzed in detail education and its relevance in uplifting the backward people. It was emphatic that free and compulsory elementary education should be introduced throughout the country. Teachers in basic schools should be drawn from artisan and occupational communities. The Commission felt that teachers from "genteel classes were prepared to talk, discuss and lecture but they were not prepared to work with their hands. Teachers should also have a thorough grounding in social sciences. Basic education is possible if the students are enabled to stay in hostels. Therefore, the Commission recommended establishing hostels throughout the length and breadth of the country. Community life in the hostels will hasten social revolution. The students should be chosen by community representatives of the area for admission into the hostels. The Commission also recommended establishment of Ashram schools, Panchkoshi schools for a cluster of villages within a radius of 5–10 km. And these schools naturally culminate into rural universities. Backward classes should be encouraged to go to higher education and research in India and abroad and governments both at the center and states should enable them through scholarships. Further, in order to achieve speedy educational advancement, special residential institutions of the university grade should be set up in states. Adult education and rural reading rooms and libraries should be set up for backward classes to have social education. Scholarships should be awarded to the backward classes on the basis of the population of the communities.

The Commission recommended that 70 percent of seats should be reserved for backward class students in all general, technical and professional colleges and institutions. Seat allocation should first start from students belonging to communities of extremely backward classes.

The Commission stated that since people believed that employment in government service was a matter of

prestige, power and influence, providing scales of pay, security of employment and scope to distribute patronage ... So long as it continues to be so, claims of OBCs for adequate representation in the service should be recognized by providing reservation of definite quota of vacancies in each class.

*(Chaurasia and Kalelkar 1956, pp. 221–2)*

Taking all these factors into consideration the conclusion reached by a majority of the members of the Commission is that the minimum basis of representation of OBCs in all Government and Local Body Services, should be as follows: Class I, 25 per cent of vacancies; Class II, 33.3 per cent of vacancies; Class III and Class IV, 40 per cent of vacancies in each. This would be over and above that which has already been conceded by Government in the case of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

*(Chaurasia and Kalelkar 1956, p. 223)*

The Commission also recommended the creation of a Ministry for the Advancement of Backward Classes both at the center and in the states. The Commission's report was submitted to the President on March 30, 1955.

Although the report along with the recommendations was approved by a majority of the members, the chairman submitted a note of dissent. Waman Meshram reveals that

Dr. Rajendra Prasad wrote a secret letter to Jawaharlal Nehru to oppose this Commission's Report. Dr Valmiki Choudhary who was the Private Assistant of Dr Rajendra Prasad has published a volume of letters of Rajendra Prasad and the secret letter is available in this volume. On receiving this letter Nehru immediately sum-

moned Kalelkar to the Central Hall of Parliament and scolded him. Nehru made him write a 31 page letter against the Backward Classes Commission. In this letter Kalelkar writes, “Although I have signed on the Report of this Commission, I kept on thinking, and I reached to this conclusion that these recommendations are not in the interest of the Backward Classes, and therefore now I am not in favour of this Report. I am against it.

(Kalelkar Commission 2008)

A similar conclusion was reached by K. C. Yadav in his book *India's Unequal Citizens*. He says that Rajendra Prasad played a major role in Kalelkar submitting the note of dissent opposing the report that he himself had signed and submitted to the government. Meshram argued that it was Ambedkar, in his resignation letter to the Union Cabinet, who raised the issue of constituting a commission as per Article 340 of the Constitution of India to identify the OBCs. In fact, Charan Singh revealed in Parliament Nehru's secret letter addressed to all the chief ministers expressing himself against reservation.

In order to avoid implementing the promise of the Janata Party in its election manifesto to grant reservation to OBCs as recommended in the Kaka Kalelkar Report, Prime Minister Morarji Desai constituted another commission. The Second Backward Classes Commission was set up in 1978 with B. P. Mandal as its chairman.

### **The Second Backward Classes Commission—Mandal Commission, 1978–80**

The Second Backward Classes Commission was constituted by the President of India in exercise of the powers conferred by Article 340 of the constitution. Morarji Desai, the Prime Minister of India made an announcement on the floor of Parliament on December 20, 1978. B. P. Mandal was appointed as the Chairman of the Commission along with four members and a secretary. The following were the terms and conditions of the Commission: 1) To determine the criteria for defining the socially and educationally backward classes; 2) To recommend steps to be taken for the advancement of the socially and educationally backward classes of citizens so identified; and 3) To examine the desirability or otherwise of making provision for reservation of appointments or posts in favor of such backward classes of citizens which are not adequately represented in public services. The Commission submitted its report to the President of India on December 31, 1980.

#### **Criteria for social and educational backwardness**

The Commission evolved 11 indicators or criteria for determining social and educational backwardness. Four are grouped under social, three under educational, and four under economic categories. All the indicators related to castes/classes have been surveyed. They are castes/classes considered as socially backward by others, castes/classes mainly dependent on manual labor, female marriage age, female work participation, children attending school, drop-out rate, proportion of matriculates, family assets, living in kutcha houses, distance to source of drinking water and consumption of loans. A weighting of three each is given to social indicators, two each to educational and one each to economic indicators and thus a composite index of backwardness was worked out. The same index along with lists of OBCs notified by various states, knowledge gained through field visits and census report of 1961 were used in identifying socially and educationally backward classes. The OBC population thus derived worked out to 52 percent

belonging to 3,743 castes and communities of which 43.7 percent were Hindu OBCs and 8.4 percent non-Hindu OBCs.

### **Recommendations of the Mandal Commission**

The Recommendations of the Mandal Commission began with a note drawing up the background for its recommendations.

The deprivation of OBCs is a very special case of the larger national issue: here, the basic question is that of social and educational backwardness and poverty is only a direct consequence of these two crippling caste-based handicaps. As these handicaps are embedded in our social structure, their removal will require far-reaching structural changes.

Further the report says, “An essential part of the battle against social backwardness is to be fought in the minds of the backward people.” The Commission states, “In a democratic set-up, every individual and community has a legitimate right and aspiration to participate in ruling this country.” In its considered opinion the Commission said, “The Hindu society has always operated a very rigorous scheme of reservation, which was internalized through caste system” (Mandal Commission Report, p. 57–8).

The recommendations are presented in six categories: 1) Quantum and Scheme of Reservations, 2) Educational Concessions, 3) Financial Assistance, 4) Structural Changes, 5) Miscellaneous and 6) Central Assistance. In accordance with the ruling of the Supreme Court, the total quantum of reservations should be below 50 percent; since 22.5 percent reservation for SCs and STs is already under implementation, the Commission recommended 27 percent reservation for OBCs. The 27 percent reservation for OBCs should also be applicable to promotions at all levels. The same quota is applicable to all recruitments in public sector undertakings, both under the central and state governments, as also in nationalized banks. All private sector undertakings which have received financial assistance from the government in one form or the other should also be obliged to recruit personnel on this basis. All universities and affiliated colleges should implement this scheme of reservation for OBCs.

To facilitate better education and the creation of a better atmosphere to enable learning, the Commission came up with suggestions that would make reservations more impactful.

Most of the backward children are irregular, indifferent to going to school and the drop-out rate is also very high. Secondly, the children come from poor homes and they are pressed by their parents to do small chores. In view of this the Commission recommends upgradation of cultural environment for which a two-pronged strategy is recommended: First, an intensive programme for adult education is to be launched and it would motivate the families to send children to school. Secondly, residential schools should be set up for backward class students and all facilities in these schools including board and lodging will have to be provided free of cost. The measure of Separate Government hostels for OBC students with the above facilities is another step in the right direction. Vocational skills should also be an area to be focused on. It is also recommended that seats should be reserved for OBC students in all scientific, technological and professional institutions run by the central as well as state governments. The quantum of reservation should be the same as in the government services *i.e.*, 27 per

cent. Special coaching facilities should be arranged for OBC students coming from impoverished cultural background.

Financial assistance is another major area to be thought of in uplifting OBCs since most of the community occupations have suffered because of mechanization, industrialization and introduction of synthetic material, as a result of which potter, blacksmith, carpenter, oil presser etc. are robbed of their traditional livelihoods and pauperization of these classes is a well known phenomenon in the country-side. It is very essential that separate financial institutions, cooperative societies and (facilities for) technical assistance are established for occupational groups and backward classes. The share of OBCs in the industrial and business life of the country is negligible. As part of the overall strategy to uplift backward classes, the state governments are advised to create a separate network of financial and technical institutions to foster business and industrial enterprise among OBCs.

While making recommendations with regard to structural changes, the Commission struck a note of warning.

Reservations in Government employment and educational institutions, as also all possible financial assistance will remain palliatives unless the problem of backwardness is tackled at its root ... Notwithstanding their numerical preponderance, backward classes continue to remain in mental and material bondage of higher castes and rich peasantry. Through their literal monopoly of means of production the higher castes are able to manipulate and coerce the backward classes ... In view of this, until the stranglehold of the existing production relations is broken through radical land reforms, the abject dependence of under-privileged classes on the dominant higher castes will continue indefinitely ... It is the Commission's firm conviction that a radical transformation of the existing production relations is the most important single step that can be taken for the welfare and upliftment of all the backward classes. The Commission therefore strongly recommends that all the State Governments should be directed to enact and implement progressive legislation so as to effect basic structural changes in the existing production relations in the country.

*(Mandal Commission Report, p. 60)*

The Commission recommended that since some occupational communities, such as fishermen and Banjaras still suffer from the stigma of untouchability in some parts of the country, their inclusion in the lists of SCs/STs may be considered. It also recommended the setting up of a Backward Classes Development Corporation and a separate ministry/department at both the central and state levels. With a view to giving better representation to certain very backward sections of OBCs like the Gaddis in Himachal Pradesh, neo-Buddhists in Maharashtra, and fishermen in coastal areas, Gujjars in Jammu and Kashmir, it recommended areas of their concentration be carved out into separate constituencies. The Commission strongly recommended that all development programs designed for OBCs should be financed by the central government in the same manner as it is done in the case of SCs and STs.

The Commission went to great lengths to study and identify the OBCs. Leading academicians, researchers, subject experts, academic institutions, national organizations, leading public intellectuals and several others were consulted for objective assessment of Indian social reality and identification of OBCs and the remedial measures that they needed. The Commission also studied the various

judgments of various courts on the steps taken in different states for empowering the OBCs. As many as 10 states had constituted 15 Backward Classes Commissions and invariably various courts of law questioned particularly the methodology followed and authenticity of data in determining the backwardness of the OBCs. The result was that the meticulously and professionally prepared report withstood the scrutiny of the Supreme Court and it upheld the report and its recommendations. This could be seen as a victory of the backward class movement in the country as a result of which the OBCs have a constitutionally mandated Commission document upholding their rights. It is for OBCs to ensure that these recommendations are implemented since as many of them have not yet been discussed either by the governments, political parties, civil society organizations or even by the social movements.

### **Judiciary on the criteria of OBC reservations**

In this section, we shall analyze the various court judgments on reservations for the OBCs and how they understood and interpreted the government policy towards the OBCs. The first case scrutinized by the courts after independence related to the Communal GO which was in vogue for three decades in the then Madras Presidency under which Brahmins were given 14 percent reservation and the remaining 86 percent was distributed among non-Brahmin Hindus, Backward Hindus, SCs, Anglo-Indians and Indian Christians, and Muslims (Yadav 1994, pp. 128–9).

The GO was challenged by a Brahmin student immediately after independence. The student seeking admission into medical college challenged the Communal GO as being violative of the fundamental right in Article 29(2). Her claim was that even though she had the required qualifications she was refused admission on the ground that she was Brahmin. This case is referred to as *State of Madras vs Smt. Champakam Dorairajan*, 1951.

The Mandal Commission quotes the judgment:

The Supreme Court in an opinion by Justice S. R. Das held that the classification in the Communal GO was based on religion, race and caste which is forbidden under Article 29(2). The court rejected the argument of the State based on Article 46 which enjoins on it to make special provisions for the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of the people, on the ground that the fundamental rights were, “sacrosanct and not liable to be abridged by any Legislative or Executive act or order, except to the extent provided in the appropriate Article in Part III.” In our opinion, that is the correct way in which the provisions found in Parts III and IV have to be understood.

*(Mandal Commission Report, p. 1)*

The Supreme Court judgment prompted a political movement led by Periyar Ramasamy that resulted in the amendment of Article 15 by adding Clause (4). The law came into effect from June 18, 1951. Article 15(4) states, “Nothing in this article or in Clause (2) of Article 29 shall prevent the State from making any special provision for the advancement of any socially and educationally backward classes of citizens or for the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes” (Acharya 2015, p. 22).

While taking up the First Amendment Bill in the Parliament, Dr B. R. Ambedkar said:

I have carefully studied both these judgments of the Supreme Court and with all respect to the judges of the Supreme Court, I cannot help saying that I find this judg-

ment to be utterly unsatisfactory ... the judgment does not appear to be in consonance with the Articles of the Constitution.

(Rao 2013, p. 77)

Thus, the First Constitutional amendment was effected in 1951. Dr B. R. Ambedkar, the then Law Minister, observed that whatever may be the criteria for the classification of backward classes and whomsoever are to be designated as such, they were to be list of castes or communities. The amendment was required because “what are called backward classes are .... nothing else but a collection of certain castes” (Mandal Commission Report, p 3).

Some of the important judgments relating to criteria of backwardness and quantum of reservations are discussed in the following pages. Almost every commission report on the OBCs and relating issues that was accepted by the state, was questioned in a court of law.

The *M. R. Balaji vs State of Mysore* case in the Supreme Court, 1963, raised certain issues like the criteria for identifying the socially and educationally backward classes, the role of caste in determining social backwardness, if the subclassification of backward classes was valid, and if the quantum of reservations excessive. Justice Gajendragadkar held that castes, poverty, occupations and place of habitation were some relevant factors for determining social backwardness. As regards educational backwardness, it must be substantially below the state average. Further, he said caste, though relevant in Indian society, could not be made the sole or dominant criteria to determine social backwardness.

While looking at the subclassification of the backwardness into “backward” and “more backward,” Justice Gajendragadkar held that the subclassification was not constitutionally permissible. The total reservation of 68 percent for SCs, STs and backward classes was held to be excessive (Mandal Commission Report, p. 12).

we are reluctant to say definitely what would be a proper provision to make speaking generally, and in a broad way, a special provision, should be less than 50 per cent, how much less than 50 per cent would depend upon the relevant prevailing circumstances in each case.

(Mandal Commission Report, p. 131)

Further, the court mentioned that in order to qualify as a backward class, the backwardness of any caste should be both social and educational backwardness, and not either social or educational backwardness. Backwardness under Article 15(4) must be comparable to the SCs and STs. By an executive order, reservation could be effected under Articles 15(4) and 16(4). This case remained a landmark judgment in fixing the reservation ceiling at 50 percent.

In the case of *P. Rajendran vs State of Madras*, the Supreme Court in 1968 examined the issue of whether caste could be considered as the sole test for determining social and educational backwardness. Justice C. J. Wanchoo held that a caste is also a class of citizens and if the caste as a whole is socially and educationally backward reservation can be made in favour of such a caste on the ground that it is socially and educationally backward class of citizens within the meaning of Article 15(4). The judgment was once again validated by the Constitutional Bench of the Supreme Court in the Mandal judgment.

The list of backward classes prepared by the Andhra Pradesh Government in 1963 for the purpose of Article 15(4) was declared invalid by the High Court of Andhra Pradesh in Sukhadev's case of 1966. The case came up for appeal in the *Supreme Court as P. Sagar vs State of A. P.* in 1968, to examine whether the list of backward classes based solely on caste was legally valid. The court invalidated the notification as the State did not place adequate materials before the court to prove that the list of backward classes was not prepared solely on caste basis.

The *State of A. P vs S. V. Balaram* case in 1972 was examined by the Supreme Court as to whether “caste” could be taken as the basis for the enumeration of backward classes. The A. P. Government appointed a Backward Classes Commission in 1968 and the commission gave its report in 1970. The commission is known as Ananthraman commission and it adopted the criteria of general poverty of the class or community as a whole, whether the occupation practiced by the community was considered inferior, unclean or undignified and unremunerative or one which does not carry influence or power and educational backwardness of the community. The government accepted the criteria. Though the commission recommended 30 percent reservation, the state government through GO No. 1793/Education of September 1970 made reservation of 25 percent. The Andhra Pradesh High Court struck down the GO since the basis of classification was based on caste. On appeal, the Supreme Court through Justice Vaidilingam, reversed the High Court decision in *Balaram vs State of A. P* and upheld the Commission’s criteria of social and educational backwardness for determining a caste’s backwardness. Justice Vaidilingam observed:

It should not also be missed that a caste is also a class of citizens and that a caste as such may be socially and educationally backward. If after collecting the necessary data it is found that the caste as a whole is socially and educationally backward, in our opinion, the reservation made for such persons will have to be upheld notwithstanding the fact that a few individuals in the group may be both socially above the general average. There is no gainsaying the fact that there are numerous castes in the country which are socially and educationally backward and therefore, a suitable provision will have to be made by the State as charged in Article 15(4) to safeguard their interests.

*(Mandal Commission Report, p. 127)*

In *K. C. Vasanth Kumar vs State of Karnataka*, 1985, all the five judges of the Constitutional Bench expressed separate opinions as to what should be the relevant criteria for identifying backward classes. The Bench comprised Chief Justice Chandrachud, Justice Desai, Justice Chinnappa Reddy, Justice A. P. Sen, and Justice Venkatramaiah. Chinnappa Reddy alone expressed the view that caste was the primary index of social backwardness and with reference to the person’s caste, social backwardness could be readily identified.

### **Mandal case and Supreme Court judgment**

The nine-judge constitutional bench of the Supreme Court presided over by Justice Ranganath Misra gave a historic judgment on the question of OBC reservations. The Supreme Court pronounced a majority judgment, 6:3, on November 16, 1992, and upheld the 27 percent reservation for OBCs in the services. The court also went into several methodological and conceptual questions of the report. By now we know that the question of constitutional reservation for OBCs has undergone series of setbacks in law courts and the Supreme Court wanted to settle the law in an authoritative way. A brief summary of the judgment is as follows:

1.
  - (i)
    - (a) It is not necessary that the “provision” under Article 16(4) should necessarily be made by the Parliament/Legislature. Such provisions can be made by the Executive also. Local bodies, Statutory Corporations and other instrumentalities of the State falling under Article 12 of the Constitution are themselves competent to make such a provision, if so advised.

- (b) An executive order making a provision under Article 16(4) is enforceable the moment it is made and issued.
- (ii)
  - (a) Clause (4) of Article 16 is not an exception to clause (1). It is an instance and an illustration of the classification inherent in clause (1).
  - (b) Article 16(4) is exhaustive of the subject of reservation in favor of backward class of citizens, as explained in this judgment.
- (iii)
  - (a) A caste can be and quite often is a social class in India. If it is backward socially, it would be a backward class for the purposes of Article 16(4). Among non-Hindus, there are several occupational groups, sects and denominations, which for historical reasons, are socially backward. They too represent backward social collectivities for the purposes of Article 16(4).
  - (b) Neither the Constitution nor the law prescribes the procedure or method of identification of backward classes. Nor is it possible or advisable for the court to lay down any such procedure or method. It must be left to the authority appointed to identify. It can adopt such method/procedure as it thinks convenient and so long as its survey covers the entire population, no objection can be taken to it. Identification of backward classes can certainly be done with reference to castes among, and along with, other occupational groups, classes and sections of people ...
  - (c) It is not correct to say that the backward class of citizens contemplated in Article 16(4) is the same as the socially and educationally backward classes referred to in Article 15(4). It is much wider. The accent in Article 16(4) is on social backwardness. Of course, social, educational and economic backwardness are closely intertwined in the Indian context.
  - (d) From among the OBCs the Creamy Layer must be excluded (for giving benefits under the present order).
  - (e) It is not necessary for a class to be designated as a backward class that it is situated similarly to the Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes.
  - (f) The adequacy of representation of a particular class in the services under the State is a matter within the subjective satisfaction of the appropriate Government ...
- (iv)
  - (a) A backward class of citizens cannot be identified only and exclusively with reference to economic criteria.
  - (b) It is, of course, permissible for the Government or other authority to identify a backward class of citizens on the basis of the occupation-cum-income, without reference to caste, if it is so advised.
- (v) There is no constitutional bar to classify the backward classes of citizens into backward and more backward categories.
- (vi)
  - (a) & (b) The reservations contemplated in clause (4) of Article 16 should not exceed 50 per cent. While 50 per cent shall be the rule, it is necessary not to put out of consideration certain extraordinary situations inherent in the great diversity of this country and people....
  - (c) The rule of 50 per cent should be applied to each year. It cannot be related to total strength of the class, category, service or cadre, as the case may be.

- (d) Devadasan case wrongly decided and is accordingly over-ruled to the extent it is inconsistent with this judgment.
- (vii) Article 16(4) does not permit provision for reservations in the matter of promotion ...
- (viii) While the rule of reservation cannot be called anti-meritarian, there are certain services and posts to which it may not be advisable to apply the rule of reservation ...
- (xi) The reservation of 10 per cent of the posts in favour of other economically backward sections of the people who are not covered by any of the existing schemes of the reservations made in the impugned office memorandum dated 25.9.1991 is constitutionally invalid and is accordingly struck down....
- (xiii) The Government of India and the State Governments have the power to, and ought to, create a permanent mechanism—in the nature of Commission—for examining requests of inclusion and complaints of over-inclusion or non-inclusion in the list of the OBCs, and to advise the Government, which advise shall ordinarily be binding upon the Government. Where, however, the Government does not accept the advice, it must record its reasons thereof.

*(Yadav 1994, pp. 98–101)*

The striking down of reservations in the Mandal case paved the way for the Constitution (77th Amendment) Act. Parliament amended Article 16 by inserting clause (4-A) and it came into force with effect from June 17, 1995. The inserted clause (4-A) reads as follows:

Nothing in this Article shall prevent the State from making any provision for reservation in matters of promotion, to any class or classes of posts in the services under the State in favour of Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes which in the opinion of the State, are not adequately represented in the services under the State.

*(Rao 2000, p. 92)*

However, in terms of matters of promotion in state services, the amendment makes no mention of reservation for the OBCs.

The Human Resource Development ministry of the Government of India initiated the Constitutional Amendment to provide reservation in higher educational institutions including private sector to give access to the socially and educationally backward classes, SCs and STs. The Constitution (93rd Amendment) Act 2005, which came into force with effect from January 20, 2006, inserted an amendment, that is Clause 5 in Article 15, and it reads as follows:

Article 15 – prohibition of discrimination on grounds of religion race, caste, sex or place of birth.

(5) Nothing in this article or in sub-clause (g) of clause (1) of Article 19 shall prevent the State from making any special provision, by law, for the advancement of any socially and educationally backward classes of citizens or for the Scheduled Castes or the Scheduled Tribes in so far as such special provisions relate to their admission to educational institutions including private educational institutions, whether aided or unaided by the State, other than the minority educational institutions referred to in clause (1) of Article 30.

*(Acharya 2015, p. 22)*

After the amendment, Parliament enacted the Central Educational Institutions Reservation in Admissions Act, 2006. The said Act provides reservations to SCs with 15 percent, STs 7.5

percent, and OBCs 27 percent in central educational institutions, namely, central universities, Indian institutes of technology, Indian institutes of management and designated universities. The 93rd Constitution Amendment Act was challenged, and the Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court gave its majority judgment through Chief Justice Balakrishnan validating the Act. The case is known as *Ashok Kumar Thakur vs Union of India*, 2008. The exclusion of minority institutions from the purview of the Act was upheld.

Balagopal said,

Nevertheless by the time of the Mandal Commission case, caste as a social category had come to be accepted by the courts as a class of a kind, eligible for reservations if it is backward. *Ashoka Kumar Thakur vs Union of India* (the judgment was pronounced on 10 April 2008), through the said three judges, introduces a revision: caste becomes a class only after the creamy layer is removed. Thus, the removal of creamy layer is no longer a matter of purported justice within the community as between the more backward and the less backward amongst it, as it was in the Mandal Commission case, but a necessary pre-requisite for the caste to at all be a class, and *a fortiori* a backward class. This is a very significant conceptual revision, effected silently by a majority of this five-judge bench in a reference that was unnecessary in the first place.

(Balagopal 2009, p. 17)

### **Political/official response to First Backward Classes Commission recommendations**

The central government's delay in constituting the Backward Classes Commission gives an adequate indication that the Congress leadership was uncomfortable with the category called backward classes. The constitution mandated the state to constitute the Commission in 1950 but the government took three years to do that. The attitude is even more evident from the way government responded to the Commission's report. After the Kalelkar Commission submitted its report, the government took more than a year to place it before Parliament. G. B. Pant, the then Union Home Minister took objection to the Kalelkar Commission's recommendations. The report was placed before Parliament on September 3, 1956, along with the memorandum of action taken.

The majority of the members of the Commission hold the position of the individual in the social hierarchy based on caste as determining the degree and extent of backwardness. The emphasis on caste has further been highlighted by some of the minutes of dissent. The tone and temper displayed therein bring into prominence the dangers of separatism inherent in this kind of approach. It cannot be denied that the caste system is the greatest hindrance in the way of our progress towards an egalitarian society, and the recognition of the specified castes as backward may serve to maintain and even perpetuate the existing distinctions on the basis of caste.

(Pant 1956)

The Commission also recommended a large number of castes, but it did not evolve objective criteria. The Union government felt it should be left to the state governments and the preparation of OBCs list at the central level was abandoned.

Addressing the Congress Parliamentary Party in 1954, Nehru laid out his position thus:

We talk about casteism, and we condemn it as we should. But the fact remains that half a dozen or may be 10 so-called superior castes dominate the Indian scene among the Hindus. There is no doubt about it. And if I talk about removal of casteism, don't understand by that that I want to perpetuate the present classification, some at the top and the other people at the bottom. If we do not equalize or tend to equalize, undoubtedly casteism will flourish in a most dangerous way.

(*Backward Class Commission Report 1956, Vol. I,*  
p. 138)

Contrary to this position taken on caste in the party meeting, Nehru took a different line while addressing the Chief Ministers:

I have referred above to efficiency and to our getting out of our traditional ruts. This necessitates our getting out of the old habit of reservations and particular privileges being given to this caste or that group. The recent meeting we held here at which the Chief Ministers were present, to consider national integration, laid down that help should be given on economic considerations and not on caste. It is true that we are tied up with certain rules and conventions about helping the Scheduled Castes and Tribes. They deserve help but even so I dislike any kind of reservation, more particularly in service. I react strongly against anything which leads to inefficiency and second-rate standards.

But if we go in for reservations on communal and caste basis, we swamp the bright and able people and remain second-rate or third-rate. I am grieved to learn how far this business of reservation has gone on communal consideration. It has amazed me to learn that even promotions are based sometimes on communal or caste considerations. This way lies not only folly but disaster. Let us help the backward groups by all means but never at the cost of efficiency. How are we going to build our public sector or indeed any sector with second rate people?

(*Yadav 1994, pp. 217–18*)

Socialist leader Ram Manohar Lohia was highly critical of Nehru and his pro-Kashmiri Pandit's frame of mind. He questioned as to why almost all top executives in Delhi were Kashmiri Pandits? He was highly critical of Congress saying it was basically constituted by Brahmins and Banias and it is the enemy of the OBCs, the minorities and the poor.

The first conference of the Samyukta Socialist Party to which Lohia belonged, adopted a resolution related to efficiency and merit in relation to backward classes and it reads as follows:

It should be remembered that equality and equal opportunities are not synonymous. In a society characterized by a hierarchical structure based on birth, the principle of equal opportunity cannot produce an equal society. The established conventional notions about merit and ability must result in denial of opportunities in actual practice for backward castes, Harijans, Adivasis (tribals) etc. The principle of preferential opportunities alone will ensure that the backward sections will catch up with the advanced ones in a reasonable period of time.

(*Jaffrelot 2003, p. 264*)

The resolution recommended a quota of 60 percent for the backward section of the society comprising the SCs, STs, the OBCs and women not only in services but in "all spheres" includ-

ing education and elections to legislative assemblies. The resolutions were intended to give a share of power to the low castes; it was an empowerment scheme (Jaffrelot 2003, p. 265).

The Samyukta Socialist Party in its policy statement in 1947 in relation to caste states:

In India apart from economic inequalities, there are social inequalities, particularly among one of the communities, namely Hindus. The system of castes is anti-social, undemocratic and tyrannous in as much as it divides men into high and low, touchable and untouchable, curtails human liberties and interferes with economic activities.

(Jaffrelot 2003, p. 259)

The All-India Backward Classes Federation (AIBCF) was formed on January 26, 1950, to protest against the scant attention OBCs received in the Indian Constitution. Its two important constituents were the Uttar Pradesh Backward Classes Federation formed in 1929 and the Bihar State Backward Classes Federation formed in 1947. Panjabrao Deshmukh, Oxford-educated and belonging to Madhya Pradesh, became its first President. The AIBCF submitted a memorandum to the Kalelkar Commission and pleaded for a reservation of 60 percent for OBCs. Deshmukh was a Union minister and was reluctant to leave Congress. The AIBCF was split in 1957 and the faction lead by R. L. Chandapuri later merged with the Socialist Party. After the passing away of Deshmukh, Brahma Prakash Chaudhury, a Yadav and the first Chief Minister of Delhi became president of the AIBCF.

In AIBCF meetings the leadership spoke against the Brahmin-Bania Raj and adopted resolutions demanding that caste be the criterion in identifying OBCs as part of reservation policy. One of the AIBCF resolutions is as follows:

The Federation is of the firm opinion that even though ultimately a class of people are to be judged by economic well-being, in the transition period when large sections suffer from social disabilities in addition to economic poverty it would not be in the national interest to determine backwardness in terms of economic criteria alone. Social backwardness – as laid down in the Constitution – can only be determined in terms of castes and communities to which the stigma applies as a whole.

(Jaffrelot 2003, p. 233)

The All India Yadav Mahasabha campaigned for implementation of the Kalelkar Commission Report. The All India Kurmi Mahasabha along with Koories gave a call for merger of all OBC organizations. At its 1972 session its slogan was “*Pichada Jagao Desh Bachao*” (Awaken the Backwards, save the country).

Ram Naresh Yadav, the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh from the Janata Party and a Lohiaite, issued historic orders implementing 15 percent reservations for OBCs in 1977. The upper castes took to the streets opposing the policy. Political activists from different parties, academics, technocrats, doctors and the press opposed the reservations for OBCs. As the situation got out of hand, Ram Naresh Yadav had to resign (Yadav 1994, p. 166).

Yet another chief minister who had to resign over the OBC reservation was Madhavsinh Solanki, a Rajput and Chief Minister of Gujarat. He implemented 28 percent reservation for OBCs in 1983. This was resisted by the Patidars and backed by the upper caste-dominated Hindutva organizations, leading to violence and bloodshed. The Chief Minister (CM) was willing to withdraw the 18 percent reservation which was an addition to the prevailing 10 percent. His offer was rejected, and he had to resign from office. He paid a heavy price for being pro-OBC. The next CM withdrew the increase in reservations (Yadav 1994, p. 155).

Pressure from upper-caste leaders over the OBC issue cost Daroga Prasad Rai, a Yadav, his post as Bihar CM. He belonged to Congress and it was the first time ever that the party chose an OBC as the CM. However, the first OBC CM of the state was B. P. Mandal, a Yadav, who was the president of Shoshit Dal, and became Chief Minister of Bihar in 1968 with support of the Congress party. Mandal had to resign because he insisted on tabling in the legislative assembly an enquiry report on corruption in the state. The then Prime Minister Mrs Indira Gandhi tried to pressurize him not to make the report public as it would have exposed several Congress functionaries involved in corruption. When he refused to accede to the pressure, Congress withdrew its support and the Mandal government fell.

Daroga Prasad Rai attempted several measures to give importance to OBCs. He reduced the number of ministers belonging to the upper castes in his cabinet to an all-time low. He appointed an OBC Indian administrative service officer as Chief Secretary by superseding several upper-caste officers. He also set up a Backward Classes Commission. These measures were not to the liking of the upper castes of his party and with the help of the party high command, Rai was forced to resign as CM (Yadav 1994, p.174).

Karpoori Thakur, a Nai (barber) by caste, immediately after becoming Chief Minister of Bihar in 1978, issued orders to implement 20 percent reservation for OBCs, and 6 percent for women and the economically backward classes. The upper caste people—Brahmins, Kayasths, Rajputs, Bhumihars, showed their opposition to these measures on the streets and let loose an orgy of violence. They burnt trains and buses, damaged railway tracks, uprooted telegraph poles and destroyed public property. Karpoori Thakur had to resign as the CM. The sin that he committed was that he gave reservation to the weak and backward (Yadav 1994, p. 175). Although the policies conformed to the ideals of the constitution promoting social justice is resented by the upper-caste political leadership and therefore anybody who dared to do it was not tolerated.

The followers of Lohia and socialism, under the leadership of Jayaprakash Narayan (JP) launched a movement against corruption and gave a call for “Total Revolution” in 1974. The movement faced heavy repression during the Emergency (from 1975 to 1977) imposed in the country by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. Once the Emergency was lifted, the opposition leaders who had been jailed during the Emergency came together and formed Janata Party to fight the post-Emergency parliamentary elections. The socialists were traditional supporters of reservations for backward classes. All political parties except Congress promised in their election manifestoes to introduce reservations for backward classes. The Janata Party in partnership with political parties of different and differing ideologies—right, center and left—was elected to Parliament with a majority and formed the government. Several backward class men and women were elected to Parliament on a Janata Party ticket. They were largely socialists. During the election campaign, they promised OBC reservation and the implementation of the Kalelkar Commission report. Post-election, the party MPs pressurized the Prime Minister Morarji Desai for the implementation of the First Backward Classes Commission. However, citing the time that had lapsed since the report was submitted, the PM appointed the Second Backward Classes Commission under the Chairmanship of B. P. Mandal, a well-known socialist from Bihar.

### **Political/government response to Second Backward Classes Commission—Mandal debate**

#### **Arguments of Congress and BJP**

The Second Backward Classes Commission, popularly known as Mandal Commission, was appointed by the President as mandated under Article 340 of the Indian Constitution

on December 20, 1978, by the Janata Party government headed by Morarji Desai. The Commission submitted its report to the President of India on December 31, 1980. The report was placed on the table of the Parliament on April 30, 1982, during the rule of Congress (I) under the prime ministership of Mrs Indira Gandhi. P. C. Sethi, the Home Minister, stated on the floor of the House on August 11, 1983: "I can assure the honourable members that we are desirous and sympathetic towards this problem and want to implement this ... we shall implement it—maybe there will be variation in percentage" (Yadav 1994, p. 90). The then President of India Giani Zail Singh also commented on the report. "The recommendations made by the Commission raise important and complex issues that have wide and deep implications for the country as a whole." (Jaffrelot 2003, p. 330). However, Mrs Gandhi shelved the report and the following Congress government headed by Rajiv Gandhi did not take up the issue.

In 1989, the National Front government, a coalition of non-Congress political parties, was elected to the Parliament. V. P. Singh of the Janata Dal was chosen to lead the new government. On August 7, 1990, he made a historic announcement in Parliament: The government would implement the Mandal Commission Report recommendations by providing 27 percent reservation for OBCs in the services. This act of government resulted jubilation among the OBCs across the country as they had been fighting for the constitutional right of representation for decades. V. P. Singh called the implementation of the Mandal Report a silent revolution (Jaffrelot 2009, p. 8). This was a bolt from blue for the upper-caste opponents to reservations. In Delhi, university students took to streets against the government's decision and the opposition spread across northern India. The political class was dumbstruck. The BJP was a partner in the National Front government but that did not stop it from opposing the decision. As in the past, it roped in its youth and student wings, the Bharatiya Yuva Morcha and Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad into mobilizing people against the decision of the government.

Although the BJP had promised OBC reservation in its election manifesto, it put forth strong opposition in parliament arguing that reservation would sidetrack merit, impact negatively on efficiency and retard development. Importantly, reservations were socially divisive and threatened the unity of the country. The party, under the leadership of L. K. Advani unleashed a massive propaganda campaign against reservation. Advani launched the Rath Yatra campaigning for Ram Janmabhoomi in Ayodhya and this effectively pushed the OBC reservation issue into the background. The BJP finally withdrew support to the V. P. Singh government and the government fell on November 7, 1990.

The Congress Party and its President, Rajiv Gandhi, too opposed reservations for the OBCs. Congress was reported to have funded the anti-Mandal agitation. Congress President Rajiv Gandhi believed that the reservation was not an issue for the country.

It is not just a question of ... a social wrong which has existed for many years. Today we need to harness all the energies of the nation ... to compete with other countries. That can only be done if we harness all the resources of our people. That includes... the most backward, the poorest.

*(Lok Sabha Debates 1990)*

Rajiv Gandhi is known for the slogan of "taking India into the 21st century" Against the socialist path espoused by Nehru, Rajiv Gandhi stood for liberalization of the Indian economy and setting in motion an information technology revolution. As the Leader of the Opposition, Rajiv Gandhi spoke at length in the Lok Sabha against the Mandal Commission Report and moved a resolution amounting to rejection of reservation. During the discussion in the House

on the issue, he admitted that “the Congress policies of introducing caste-based reservations in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh were a mistake” (Yadav 1994, p. 91).

The Congress party, from Nehru through Indira Gandhi to Rajiv Gandhi, held that the criteria for backwardness should be based on economic criteria although the constitution clearly recognizes social backwardness, and by implication, the role of caste in determining the status of castes and communities. Almost every commission, constituted either by union or state governments, recognized the centrality of caste in identifying OBCs. However, the OBCs within Congress did try to convince Rajiv Gandhi to support OBC reservation. For instance, leaders belonging to more politically powerful castes like P. Shivshankar and Chandrajith Yadav tried but failed to convince Rajiv Gandhi. The far more powerful Brahmin-Bania clique, with the support of regional landed/feudal castes had the last word considering that their consciousness is rooted in the hierarchically graded caste system and opposes sharing public space and power with the “inferior” castes and hence opposed the vertical mobility and mainstreaming of the OBCs. Congress and BJP demanded quotas for the economically backward classes exclusion of the socially or economically advanced individuals from the OBCs. Prime Minister V. P. Singh rejected this demand saying that it would dilute the purpose. “The rule is for the whole class and section … the rule is not for individuals” (Rajya Sabha Debates 1990).

### **The communist argument**

Jyothi Basu, the then Chief Minister of West Bengal, in his presentation to the Mandal Commission, pointed out that “caste was a legacy of the feudal system and viewing the social scene from the casteist angle was no longer relevant for West Bengal” (Jaffrelot 2003, p. 255). Somnath Chatterjee of Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI (M)) said, “We are against casteism, division of people on the basis of caste. But can we deny the historical fact that such people belonging to certain castes are today the most exploited, socially, educationally and economically?” (Lok Sabha Debates 1990). However, Inderjit Gupta of CPI said,

In a democratic set-up, every individual and community has a legitimate right and aspiration to participate in ruling this country. Any situation which results in a near-denial of this right to nearly 52 per cent of the country’s population needs to be urgently rectified … 52 per cent of this population which we are talking about at present, enjoys only 4.5% of the top grade jobs. Is this not gross injustice?

*(Lok Sabha Debates 1990)*

Communists are either reluctant or indifferent to address the caste question as they believe that class alone explains and answers the problems that India is confronting. It is true that class is important in understanding India but in the absence of figuring caste into the development/exploitation paradigm as a methodological category, the dominant caste in the mold of class will casteize the nation. This class-as-caste or caste-as-class phenomenon is present within the structures of communist organizations. Communists indirectly refuse to recognize the all-pervasiveness of caste and its manifestations. However, CPI(M) argues that it

consistently stood for reservation for the backward classes … CPI(M) consistently maintained that unlike reservation for Scheduled Castes and Tribes, in the reservation for OBCs, there should be an economic criterion, as there is a greater differentiation within the OBCs … CPI(M) accepts caste as the basic criteria for reservation for

Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and OBCs as it is caste oppression which necessitates special treatment.

(Grewal 1990, p. 2570)

### ***Socialistic and Lohiaite argument***

The conceptual constructs of the pro-Mandal politics in north India are largely based on socialist and Lohiaite campaigns that have gone on for a long time. The rise of the leadership of OBCs from socialist ranks enabled the Janata Dal to counter the ideological core of Brahmin-Bania regional feudal castes both in the BJP and Congress.

Defending the Mandal Commission report, the Janata Dal questioned the Congress stand that what was important was economic development rather than reservations in the name of social justice. Janata Dal pointed out “the democratic significance of equal dignity and respect for backward classes” people who had been subjected to indignity and humiliation for hundreds of years. Democratic ideals of participation and political equality were thus constitutive of notions of social justice. The party pointed out that social justice had been seen as placing political power in the hands of the under-privileged which would kickstart social transformation, and lead to the creation of a more equal society. “Democratization of political institutions was thus envisaged as the means for bringing about social justice ... democracy refers to a form of government, and social justice, and to questions regarding the distribution of social goods” (Bajpai 2012, pp. 260–1).

### **V. P. Singh's argument**

While perspectivizing the implementation of the Mandal Commission Report, V. P. Singh said,

It is not so much the issue of economic condition but of the power structure, the power structure which has crystallized in a social structure ... Bureaucracy is a very important component of this whole power structure ... we consciously want to give them (OBCs) a position in the decision making of the country, a share in the power structure.

(Rajya Sabha Debates 1990)

(People ask) is there no poverty among the upper castes, don't they need a livelihood? This is not struggle for livelihood. This is a struggle for share in state power ... This is not an economic question. This is a strange country. Here ... respect (*izzat*) (comes) not with wealth but with caste; respect is enhanced when power is attached to caste.

(Lok Sabha Debates 1990)

While announcing the acceptance of the Mandal Commission Report in Parliament, Prime Minister V. P. Singh said it was a “momentous decision of social justice.” Regarding the argument of merit, he said,

What is the merit of the system itself? That the section which has 52 per cent of the population gets 12.55 per cent in Government employment ... in the power structure it is hardly 4.69 per cent ... the present socio-economic system is such that it is adversely biased...against the weaker sections, then asking (them) to compete equally with other

sections which are better-off is something defective in the system itself ... treating unequals as equals is the greatest injustice ... correction of this injustice is very important.

(*Rajya Sabha Debates 1990*)

V. P. Singh argued in the Lok Sabha that

what we have in education is ... scholastic merit in certain subjects. And that pertains to the individual, individual merit. But the basic lacuna ... in the education system which gets reflected in the administrative system is: what about the social merit of a person? Not how much knowledge he is, but how he relates the other human beings ... we will have to re-define what is administrative merit ... to put a social content into it ... those who have gone through suffering, those who know the pinch ... if they are in the administration they will be more responsive.

(*Lok Sabha Debates 1990*)

### ***OBC leaders' efforts to counter anti-reservation forces***

Sharad Yadav, Minister for Textiles in the Union Cabinet was at the forefront of the counter mobilization in Delhi and elsewhere, until he launched his Mandal Rath Yatra in late 1992 in reaction to the Supreme Court's decision to exclude the elite or the "creamy layer" of the OBCs from quota. Sharad Yadav and Laloo Prasad Yadav, Janata Dal President, then lobbied to exclude the middle peasantry from the "creamy layer." Eventually, government bowed to their pressure (Yadav 1994, p. 366). Laloo Prasad Yadav as Chief Minister of Bihar implemented 27 percent reservation to OBCs.

Socialist leader Mulayam Singh Yadav was disappointed as V. P. Singh focused only on reservation in the central administration leaving aside educational institutions and promotions. He was opposed to the inclusion of Jats in the OBC list. As chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, he issued orders to implement 27 percent reservation for OBCs in the state. He also provided reservation at the Panchayathi Raj level. He launched the *Arakshan Bachao* (Save Reservation) campaign in January 1996 (Yadav 1994, pp. 370–4).

### ***Bahujan Samaj Party's support for reservation***

The BSP attacked government policy Ms Mayawati, leader of BSP and Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh said,

You are depriving the oppressed people of justice but ... the total number of oppressed, backward, and minorities in the country is 85 per cent ... if 85 per cent of the people stand for their rights, a handful of people cannot thrust their will on them.

(*LSD 1990, Bajpai 2012, p. 260*)

Kanshiram, President of Bahujan Samaj Party, mobilized people with the slogan "*Arakshan lagoo karo varna Kursi khali karo*" (Either implement reservation or vacate the office) and brought pressure on the Union government to implement reservation for OBCs. He also popularized the slogan "*Arakshan se lenge DM, GM; Vote se lenge CM, PM*" (We will take the posts of District Magistrate and General Manager with reservation; and take the posts of Chief Minister and Prime Minister with vote).

Another socialist leader Ram Vilas Paswan demanded reservation in the private sector too. Paswan who was the Minister for Labour and Welfare, moving the 68th Constitution (Amendment)

Bill on May 28, 1990, in the Lok Sabha said, “We are of the opinion that reservations should be provided in private sector also and all organisations which receive governmental aid and assistance. But in order to do it, unanimity among the political parties is required” (Rao 2000, p. 193).

### **Response from intelligentsia, media and civil society**

While reviewing the fury of the forwards, writer and research scholar K. C. Yadav sums up the upper-caste argument that the decision to reserve jobs for OBCs would revive casteism; “substandard” would replace the “standard” and reins of power would pass from meritocracy to mediocrity. Caste would be given precedence over merit and efficiency. He concluded that the anti-Mandal school argued that the implementation of reservations for OBCs would result in a sort of national disaster (Yadav 1994).

K. Balagopal was highly critical of the anti-Mandal movement by the upper castes. In his powerful essay “This Anti-Mandal Mania” he argues, “The entire forward caste Hindu community has suddenly become a solid rock. Fundamentalist and secular, Marxist and Gandhian, urban and rural, have all been united as nothing else would ever have united them.” In relation to ownership by caste he says, For four full decades, the forward-caste Hindus dominated every aspect of life in the country. They have held all the land, all the capital in trade, finance and industry, they have held all the top positions in administration, education, science, technology and medicine, and what a pass they have brought the country to!

Tickets to the assembly or Parliament at election time, public works and excise contracts, cooperative loans, industrial licenses, supply contracts, managerial jobs in the private sector, a vice-chancellor’s post, or even a favoured relation with the administration or a profitable position within the faculty of the universities where academics unburden themselves of weighty lectures on caste and class (among other things), not one of these is obtained without the use of caste.

The casteism of the forward castes is never seen as casteism, for it is an advantage always possessed by privileged groups that their existence is taken to be part of the natural order of things. It is the challenge to that casteism that is seen as casteism. The unwritten reservation that the forward castes enjoy in the form of “connections” is incomparably more potent than all the recommendations Mandal has made for the benefit of the backward castes, but that is not seen as reservation.

As for the rest, so long as caste remains one of the determinants of property and power, so long as it is used by the rich and the powerful as a means of maintaining and strengthening their domination, it remains the moral right and indeed, the political duty of the poor and the deprived to use their caste identity in the struggle for their liberation. *Class struggle and caste struggle are not two opposite or contradictory things, but are closely interwoven and co-terminus struggles.*

(Balagopal 1990, pp. 215–22; emphasis added)

P. S. Krishnan, former Secretary to Government of India, was critical of the Union government for abdicating its responsibility in identifying and listing socially and educationally backward classes in accordance with Article 340(1), Article 15(4), Article 338(10) and Article 46. “This was in violation of the mandate and letter and spirit of the Constitution ... Every delaying tactic and subterfuge was resorted to for continuing to evade the constitutional mandate until the Gordian knot was cut in 1990.” He in fact went into history to understand the initiatives of British administrators and said,

Mounstuart Elphinstone, the legendary British administrator, recognized in the mid-19th century that “the missionaries find in the lowest caste the best pupils”. The Board of Education of Bombay Presidency in its Report for 1850–51 was confident that if the doors of education were opened to “the despised castes—the Dheds, Mahars, etc.”, they would turn into “men of superior intelligence to any in the community.

(*Krishnan 2006*)

When at last the British Victorian government took toddler steps to extend elementary education in a small way to the children of untouchables, there was violence, physical obstruction and waylaying of the children. The Indian Education (Hunter) Commission of 1882 has given instances of this from Malabar (then in Madras Presidency, now in Kerala) to Central Provinces (now Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Chhattisgarh) and Bombay Presidency (Maharashtra, Gujarat, Karnataka). The administration was in collusion with the perpetrators of this violence as it was manned entirely by persons from one or a few communities holding a monopoly over jobs and education and did not want the lower castes to get educated and break into their monopoly.

(*Krishnan 2006*)

The well-known political scientist and author Zoya Hasan draws data from the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) and says,

Upper castes form a third of the population of urban India, but account for around two-thirds of graduate population ... Only a little more than 1 per cent of SC and ST and Muslims are graduates in rural India, while the figure for upper castes is 5 per cent ... the overall point is that SC, ST, Muslims and OBCs are significantly under-represented in Indian higher education ... Upper castes continue to dominate public institutions, skilled professions, media etc and are able to influence public policies and opinion, while SC, ST, OBC and Muslims are way behind the upper castes in all spheres of public life, especially in higher and professional education ... The Mandal Commission declared over 80 Muslim groups to be backward and categorized half of the Muslim population as backward.

(*Zoya Hasan, Vol VI, p. 76–80*)

Analyzing the placard displayed by the anti-Mandal women agitators that said “We don’t want unemployed husbands” Uma Chakravarti, feminist-historian, says, “What the placards were saying was that these girls would be deprived of upper caste IAS husbands. But what they were also saying was that the OBCs and Dalits who would now occupy these positions in the IAS could never be their potential husbands” (Chakravarti 2018, p. 1).

Praful Bidwai, journalist-analyst-activist, analyzing the fallacy of merit says,

Many universities that are globally rated highly—and only two Indian institutions rank among the world’s top 500, according to Shanghai University survey—consciously promote a diverse mix of cultures, languages and social and ethnic backgrounds through aggressive Affirmative Action. They admit students not because they are “bright”, but because they are “interesting” and can contribute to diversity. Diversity has not lowered the ranks of Harvard, Oxford, the Sorbonne or London

School of Economics. Further he says the anti-Mandal movement was backed by “upper caste-dominated guilds” like the Indian Medical Association and traders’ associations, chambers of commerce, industry lobbies, anti-poor upper middle-class Residents Welfare Associations in many cities, students’ parents, business executives and, above all, owners of private (that is, commercial) professional colleges which annually admit over 530,000 students.

(*Bidwai 2006*)

In 1990, when the Indian media faced its first significant challenge on the question of affirmative action for the Socially and Educationally Backward Classes (SEBCs), it responded by invoking the sacred trope of a seamless Indian national identity and denouncing the divisiveness of caste. Editorially, *The Indian Express* (August 9, 1990) condemned the decision as “ruinous” and gloomily forecast a further deterioration of the state apparatus and heightened social tensions as the first consequence of a “crassly opportunistic” move. The *Times of India* (August 9, 1990) similarly condemned the Mandal Commission recommendations on job reservations in the central government that threatened to undo “at one stroke, all that had been achieved over four decades of Independence in building a “modern, egalitarian order.” Reservations, it said, would “enshrine casteism, undermine meritocracy and excellence, and work against the creation of a pan Indian identity.”

*The Indian Express*, then edited by Arun Shourie, who was later a member of the Union Cabinet, delivered its judgment in mid-August, pronouncing the anti-Mandal agitation was a clear “defence of the national interest” and exhorted the agitationists to “spread and intensify the disturbances” (Muralidharan, p. 86–92).

A research study analyzed why the Indian media supported the anti-reservation agitation.

(A) survey of British media found that of the senior journalists with decisive influence over news priorities and editorial policies, a significant majority is drawn from a narrow privately-schooled, Oxbridge-educated elite ... A survey (of Indian journalists in New Delhi) found that of a sample of 315 journalists in the national capital with the authority to determine media agendas, not one belonged to either a Scheduled Caste or Tribe. No fewer than 49 per cent of the sample was drawn from the Brahmanical strata. And if all caste Hindu groups were to be considered in addition to the so-called dwija or twice-born, their share in the total is no less 88 per cent.

(*Muralidharan, p. 86–92*)

Writing in April 2006, the well-known political scientist and author, Kancha Ilaiah, says, “The same upper caste youth have never agitated against private medical, engineering and management colleges selling seats to the rich for money. Anti-caste policy like reservation is being projected as an anti-national policy” (Ilaiah 2006, pp. 2447–9).

Roy Burman, who was on the Technical Committee of Mandal Commission, says he was in favor of reservation of seats in education and quotas in employment in government and public sector employment. But he resigned because he was not in agreement with the survey Mandal Commission conducted. He quotes from the Kalelkar Commission that the estimation it made of the OBC population was 31.8 percent and according to the estimation based on extrapolation of data available in the 1911, 1921 and 1931 censuses. The aggregate of such estimated population comes up to 20.5 percent. Burman says, as reported by the census commissioner, the data of 1951 related to non-residual forward castes exclud-

ing SCs and STs was submitted to the Kalelkar Commission (Burman, p. 53). It should be mentioned that Kalelkar identified 2,399 castes as OBCs against which the Mandal Commission identified 3,743 castes as OBCs.

Roy Burman quotes other colleagues of his who were on the Mandal Commission and prepared the methodology: “M. N. Srinivas observes that he did not consider the possibility of “secularization” being purely contextual, a caste is frequently “backward,” when it comes to obtaining access to a highly valued resource but claims a “high” status in traditional ritual context.” Yogendra Singh’s approach to the question:

even granting that a process of modernisation and mobility, industrial expansion has created a serious hiatus between caste status and social status in some parts of the country, the entrenchment of peoples’ identity in caste and community remains intact, not only endogamously but also politically and culturally.

*(Burman, p. 51)*

The distinguished scholar Prof. C. P. Bhambhri explains how the politics of the country got “casteized”: “It is a truism that public life in India is conditioned and controlled by caste identities. It can be stated unambiguously that ‘casteisation’ of politics has become a reality because of the political class.” Analyzing reservations and casteism, he says,

Public discourse on extending reservations to the private sector has to be rescued from the social justice versus meritocracy campaign and it deserves to be clearly stated that caste as an identity- marker by political class has completely casteised Indian society and polity ... Caste ideology has made workers casteists and not fighters for secular, anti-poverty programmes.

*(Bhambhri 2005, pp. 806–8)*

While it is true that the society and politics was casteized it is because the politics of the country were essentially controlled and guided by the dominant/upper castes. However, C. P. Bhambhri appears to be averse to the assertions from below. Instead of viewing such assertions as democratic, he labels them as casteist. It appears as if he is completely in line with anti-Mandal forces. The propagators of meritocracy should have been seen as casteist as they refuse to share public space with the backward castes. Making use of the opportunities disproportionate to their population is undemocratic. The workers asking for their rights to be represented in the public domain to the extent of their population is, in fact, a measure to weaken caste domination and pluralize the public space.

The well-known leftist thinker and scholar Javeed Alam puts the issue in perspective on reservations:

The politics of the militant Hindu right-wing ever since Advani’s “rath yatra” has primarily been to arrest and roll back this process of democratization of Indian society ... Among the oppressed, the appeal to caste is for unification of similar *jatis* into larger collectivities and political mobilization for power so as to subvert the very relations of the *varna* order. Caste appeal here, therefore, is far from being casteism ... What makes this battle further murky is the second process let loose by post-Mandal struggle. There has been a steady decomposition of the consciousness of the established middle classes into articulated caste interests of Brahmins or Thakurs and so on.

*(Alam 2015, p. 759)*

He further explains that the “sawarnas” do not like to talk in terms of caste nomenclature

but they can hide their interests in seeking identification with “national interest.” Therefore, it is right to consider these as the most anti-democratic section of Indian society. The argument of the hegemonic middle class about the efficiency of the Brahmin or their cohorts among other sawarnas, is casteism of an unalloyed kind.

(*Alam 2015, p. 760*)

Analyzing caste in the politics of the country, another well-known scholar K. C. Yadav says that,

upper caste bourgeoisie ruled the roost almost everywhere in Nehru’s days. The OBCs who formed over half of the country’s population had no place in the party or Government—the Legislature, executive or judiciary—or in industry or business, in both the private and public sectors. The “labour pool” created by history was not disturbed. The situation did not change much during the short stint of either Lal Bahadur Shastri or the long and eventful reign of Indira Gandhi. It was worse in the days of Rajiv (Gandhi), who promised to transform the society along modern lines.

(*Yadav 1994, p. 219*)

The argument of upper-casteization of institutional space gets strengthened further when we see the scenario in Uttar Pradesh. If we analyze the institutional positions, it is found that “in 1984, 93.8 percent of the principal secretaries and secretaries of the government (UP) were from the upper castes (including 56.3 percent Brahmins); this was also the case for 86.6 per cent of the heads of departments and 93.2 percent of the section officers. At the local level, 78.6 percent of the district magistrates were from the upper castes in 1985, including 41.1 percent Brahmins and 25 percent Kayasths. In the public sector units, 94.5 percent of managing directors were from the upper castes in 1984 (Jaffrelot 2003).

Verma et al., therefore, conclude that

the Secretariat set up, where the real state power rests, is still completely in the hands of the Upper Castes. Its exercise is controlled by the Brahmins and state power is being used in alliance with other “twice born” castes. The representation of OBCs is generally notional and in some of the key substructures like the police, judiciary and the direct employment recruiting agencies, it is totally absent.

(*Jaffrelot 2003, pp. 343–4*)

In his study on caste, development and globalization, the author (Simhadri 2009, 2014) examined the institutions that have been created as part of globalization of (erstwhile undivided) in Andhra Pradesh from the 1990s onwards, and their ownership in terms of caste. The top ten institutions/enterprises such as Special Economic Zones, infrastructure companies, industries, real estate companies, corporate education, corporate hospitals, TV channels, contractors of mega irrigation projects, newspapers and the culture industry and so on, are owned by Reddys and Kammas, the two ruling castes of the state. These two castes cornered the developmental benefits of globalization. Hence, do we call this as globalization or upper casteization of development or perhaps even “Reddy-ization” and “Kamma-ization” of development? Not a single enterprise is owned by an OBC community or an ST. However, there was just one political family from the SCs and one political family from Muslims among those who took advantage of globalization, but they are exceptions.

The state has not had a single person from OBCs, STs, and minorities as the CM of the state since its inception. The entire state, political parties, development, industry, institutions, political and civil societal leadership have been casteized—Reddy-ized and Kamma-ized. Reddys, Kammas and Velamas are represented disproportionately in the legislature. Almost none of the Denotified, nomadic and semi-nomadic communities have had access to the corridors of power. The Most Backward Castes are minimally represented in the legislatures. While the numerically dominant OBCs' representation is almost one-third of their population, for Muslims it is half of their population. The legitimate share of the OBCs is largely cornered by the Reddys and the Kammas. Therefore, the dominant castes that capture power through casteist practices want to continue to socially exclude the OBCs. In order to sustain caste hegemony, the dominant castes make every democratic and modern space inaccessible to the majority of the people. They monetize democracy to undermine assertion from below and convert every public space into a caste enclave, exclusively theirs.

Jaffrelot argues that caste and class broadly overlap; the National Sample Survey 2000 shows a remarkable correlation between caste and standard of living. According to this survey, more than 60 percent of the urban upper-caste Hindus had a per capita monthly consumption expenditure of Rs775 or more, whereas less than 25 percent of the urban OBCs and less than 18 percent of the urban SCs were in such a position. Similarly, among the urban rich whose per capita consumption expenditure is more than Rs1,500, as many as 59.8 percent were upper caste Hindus, 14.6 percent OBCs and 3.8 percent SCs. Unsurprisingly, castes and occupations coincide to a large extent. According to a survey by the Delhi-based Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, while 24.5 percent of the upper castes was “salaried” and 20.4 percent was in “business.” In the case of OBCs, 9.5 percent was salaried and 10.1 percent was in business. The figures for SCs were 10.9 percent and 5.3 percent respectively (Jaffrelot 2009, p. 3).

The writings of Ambedkar reveal that his understanding of the workings of the caste was beyond compare. He saw through the operation of caste in every sphere of the government and understood the machinations of the upper castes. In his words,

the administration in India is completely in the hands of Hindus. It is their monopoly from top to bottom, it is controlled by them. There is no department which is not dominated by them. They dominate police and revenue services, indeed any and every branch of administration. The next point to remember is that the Hindus in the administration have the same position—anti-social and criminal attitude to the untouchables, which the Hindus outside the administration have. Their only aim is to discriminate against untouchables and to deny and deprive them not only of the benefits of law, but also of the protection of the law against tyranny and oppression.

Although Ambedkar's analysis is in the context of the Dalits, it is equally applicable to the OBCs (Rao 2013, p. 79).

While responding to Mandal-II, (the announcement of the Union government in 2006 to implement 27 percent reservation in seats in educational institutions funded by the central government such as the Indian Institutes of Management, Indian Institutes of Technology, All-India Institute of Medical Sciences, et al.) the author (Simhadri 2006) pointed out that any attempt to access public space by the OBCs is resisted by developed society in the name of merit or efficiency. This happened in the past and it is happening once again in the name of “Youth for Equality.” A major question before the nation is what is merit all about? Does reservation mean that the unmeritorious are given opportunities? Does it mean that

OBC students inherently lack merit? The proponents of merit seem to measure merit by the yardstick of marks scored in examinations.

Merit is not about academic achievement alone since it depends on affordability and access to quality education. A child who comes from a socio-spatial backwardness needs to be weighed differently. That caste is an indicator of social and economic standing has been amply upheld by research studies and the court judgments. In the absence of state policy intervention in terms of socially inclusive reservation, the opportunities offered by state institutions are bound to be monopolized by the developed castes as reflected in such conservative institutions as the medical profession. Youngsters who choose medicine are academically bright. Also, they are conditioned by the family environment from childhood to become a doctor or an IITian. All energies of the child and indeed the entire family are focused on fulfilling this ambition which ensures huge earnings, vast prestige and a high degree of individual comfort. If pursuing this dream means giving up one's country, so be it.

What is missing in this entire effort is the collective good of the nation, which is hoped while resources are spent on these institutions. Yet, it is not right to blame the products of these institutions, but policy makers and the education system, which failed to inculcate the philosophy of investing common good in every act of nation-building.

The reservation debate saw the involvement of groups that hitherto had not experienced the pains of building a social movement while new stakeholders in the guise of the Knowledge Commission put forward extraneous arguments supporting supra-constitutional status.

Major political parties, though appearing to support reservation, insist upon affirmative action thereby undermining the reservations and its benefits. The argument that reservation is divisive conveniently ignores the fact that Indian society has been and continues to be deeply divided by caste. The social exclusion practiced by the dominant castes resulted in mono-culturization of institutions. Ample testimony to this phenomenon is provided by the response to reservation by such institutions as media, political parties, bureaucracy and industry, which are constituted and led by upper castes resulting in the “upper caste-ization” of every one of the country’s major institutions. No civilized state can afford to have its major institutions headed by such forces which do not believe in equality of opportunity and mainstreaming the marginalized. A nation which does not integrate cultural plurality in its nation-building process remains a nation without nationhood. Therefore, it is not worth arguing for merit of examinations. Merit operates on the principle of distributive justice. It is a socially inclusive concept that believes in the nation’s common good. Elevation of the disadvantaged not only benefits individuals and families, but ushers in a new chapter in the lives of the backward castes and communities. In fact, the very access to modern institutions throws open a window to the world. With India wedded to modernization, it is all the more necessary on the part of the state to connect the underprivileged to national institutions. This is possible only when all castes and communities are enabled and involved in participating in the modern institutions.

The competition between unequals is an effective method the Indian social system devised to exclude lower castes from higher education. The upper castes acquired the position they have now by cornering every opportunity in the name of the nation’s development. In many ways, these castes implemented unstated reservation for themselves. Therefore, any move to democratize the opportunities is resisted. Though the anti-reservation movement is known as “Youth for Equality,” it is essentially a movement to increase inequality so that lower castes are kept away from the fruits of their own labor. The movement was to resist castes’ democratic aspirations through reservation so that upper-caste reservation would not be disturbed.

### **Affirmative action**

American President Lyndon Johnson, as part of the Great Society initiative, issued an Executive Order effecting Affirmative Action in 1965. The objective of the directive was to encourage African Americans to get into private business and educational institutions for jobs and college admissions. Lyndon Johnson in his 1965 speech said,

You do not take a person who, for years, has been hobbled by chains, and liberate him, bring him up to the starting line of a race and then say, “you are free to compete with all others” and still justly believe that you have been completely fair. Thus, it is not enough just to open the gates of opportunity; all our citizens must have the ability to walk through those gates.

(Rao 2000, p. 116)

The Indian corporate world is opposed to Mandal-based reservations as it believes that reservations will “kill efficiency” and “weaken the competitiveness.” However, they say that they are willing to go for American type affirmative action as they think it is voluntary. Any business, contractor or university had to de-segregate their workplaces and had to take concrete, verifiable steps to recruit blacks at all levels of the hierarchy. Any business which does not make its workforce in proportion to racial make-up, can have the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and the Labor Department initiate action against them.

In fact, American industry adopted affirmative action because it is a good business policy. They believe it brings in many different perspectives and styles of thinking which adds to innovation and creativity. The industry gives plus points for other indicators of initiative, perseverance and originality. The world’s most competitive firms have become competitive to employ African Americans, Hispanics and women. Lyndon Johnson called for “equality as a fact and a result” and not just as a legal statement of good intentions. While looking at race the United States Supreme Court Justice, Harry Blackman, says that, “in order to go beyond racism, we must first take account of race” (The Civil Rights Movement 2015).

Noted Dalit activist Udit Raj (p. 42) says,

Reservation has been at work in many other countries in one form or the other. IBM voluntarily introduced reservation for blacks as far back as 1930. In Malaysia, reservation for Malays, the aborigines of the country, is applicable not only in jobs but also in contracts, licenses and company shares. There is reservation for depressed and weaker sections of society in many countries like Brazil, South Africa, Japan, the Netherlands and Ireland. There is 50 per cent reservation for Blacks and women in the medical faculty at Harvard University, considered to be the Mecca of learning and the foremost university of the world. The whites, happy with the remaining 50 per cent of seats, have welcomed the step and have never made an issue of it.

In the context of the New Economic Policy, Sukhadeo Thorat analyzes the Malaysian scenario and says,

The Malaysian government has set up the Investment Foundation and National Equity Corporation for Malays, which ensures that the minority community gets an appropriate percentage of shares in companies ... the government also developed a policy

to increase the participation of the minority community in foreign companies. The legally sanctioned, systematic redistribution of private capital ownership to minorities was accomplished under the aegis of New Economic Policy (1970–1990) in Malaysia. Under this policy, the share of Malaysian corporations owned by native Malays rose from 2 per cent to 30 per cent in two decades.

(Thorat 2007, p. 16)

Analyzing the exclusion of OBCs, Justice M. N. Rao says, the expression “backward classes” in the Indian context implies backward castes as caste is a class by itself. For public services reflecting class diversity, Justice Rao quotes Ambedkar saying that in a country like India where the public service is almost exclusively manned by people of the community where power is being abused for the aggrandizement of a class, the best antidote against it is to insist upon a proper admixture of castes and creeds including the depressed classes in the public services of the country.

Justice Rao argues that the concept of legal equality divorced from reality serves no social purpose: It would be an empty slogan bereft of practical content and quotes Bernard Swartz, authority on American Constitutional Law:

Even legal equality can exist only in so far as each member of the community possesses in fact, not only in form, equal chances of using his natural endowments. In proportion as the capacities of some are sterilized or stunted by their social environment, while those of others are favoured or even pampered by theirs, the right of equality becomes an elegant but anaemic euphemism. Hence, the claim with the society and the legal order are being presented, that there is a social duty to make ‘compensation’ for the inequalities under which less favoured members of the community have had a live--a claim that the law is urged to recognize and support.

Further, Justice Rao quotes Justice Subba Rao, in the dissenting opinion in *T. Devadasan vs Union of India*,

centuries of calculated oppression and habitual submission reduced a considerable section of our community to a life of serfdom. It would be well-nigh impossible to raise their standards if the doctrine of equal opportunity was strictly enforced in their case. They would not have any chance if they were made to enter the open field of competition without adventitious aids till such time when they could stand on their own legs.

Lohia pointed out that the caste had been playing a “dirty trick” on OBCs for countless years by drawing a discriminating circle round them in the following manner: “Caste restricts opportunity. Restricted opportunity constricts ability. Constricted ability further restricts opportunity. Where caste prevails, opportunity and ability are restricted to ever-narrowing circles of people” (Lohia, cited in Agrawal 2008).

While writing on “Why Brahmins hate reservation?” Periyar E.V. Ramasami says,

Communal representation is the accredited right of every nation and its government. It is the common right of citizens belonging to every community. The main motive of the principle of communal representation is to eradicate inequality among the citizens. Communal representation is a “boon” in creating a society of equals. When there are forward and progressive communities hampering the well-being of all the other com-

munities, there is no other way but to resort to the system of communal representation. This is how the suffering communities can begin to heave a sigh of relief. The need for the system of communal representation will automatically cease when all the communities are made equals.

Moreover, when we have allowed the classification of society based on religion, caste and community, we cannot stand in the way of people demanding special rights based on religion, caste and community. There is nothing wrong on their part in safeguarding their interests.

Casteism made the people go backward. Castes spell more and more ruination. Castes have made us low and have-nots. Until all these evils are eradicated and everyone attains an equal status in life, proportional representation based on population is indispensable ... Our people should get their due share in the public services and in all other fields according to their percentage in the total population.

(*Periyar 2016, pp. 56–7*)

The last word on this can be given to Swami Vivekananda whom Justice M. N. Rao quotes saying “no society put its foot on the neck of the wretched as mercilessly as does that of India” (Rao 2013, p. 45).

### **Caste-conditioned consciousness**

Caste is divisive, graded and it freezes social mobility leading to compartmentalized/cellular consciousness and producing rigidified social structures. It is reflected more in ritual spaces. It is thrust on communities by vested interests and sustained so that the general behavior conforms to a given format. Caste promotes some and marginalizes others. Caste brings high social status to some and low social status disrespect to others. It brings pride to some and social humiliation for others. Caste serves as a vehicle, promoting interests and aspirations for some. For others, it is an obstruction and a demobilizing force. It is a total negation for many. It is exclusive and refuses to recognize the Other. Caste qualifies some for positions of authority and power, but the Others are disqualified from the mainstream and denied every opportunity that is offered as times change.

Both dominant and subaltern castes engage groups and communities in negating each other. Although intra-caste engagement promotes equality, inter-caste engagement often leads to disunity. It has been seen that often, the subaltern castes fight undemocratic structures and unequal social relations but when it comes to their social/caste hierarchy, they promote those very structures of domination and subordination when they gain a semblance of power. The oppressed communities aspire to social dignity and fight social contempt and insecurity that is fostered by the caste hierarchy. Once a small minority of OBC communities improve their economic status and acquire clout, whether of money or position, they tend to imitate the dominant communities in undemocratic behavior, both socially and economically, and in clannish behavior. These communities are mostly small numerically and are localized in influence and presence. For instance, the rise of the Kamma, Reddy and Velama communities in the two Telugu states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. The other sections of OBCs, those castes that are numerically larger and have a pan-India presence are experiencing exclusion from power and democratic space. The neo-OBCs who no longer consider themselves as OBCs being in possession of both economic and political power, dominate the nation and strategically engage in exclusionary practices in the name of nation, nationalism, unity, efficiency, merit, and so on. Therefore, there

is a need to create mechanisms to promote justice, equality and fraternity leading to unity. In fact, reservation is viewed as one such equalizer to an extent as it is capable of breaking caste boundaries, promote mobility and cast off the sedimented, hierarchical and graded consciousness promoted by the caste system. Interactive spaces are known to open up ghettoized mindsets, but as such there is simultaneously resistance too to change. The experience across the world has shown that political and civil society players can make a difference in shaping the mind and social consciousness, and thus realizing democracy.

Caste as produced and sustained by Hinduism is against development and democracy. Therefore, all those who seek development and believe in the democratic path, should take caste head-on, recognize, discuss, debate and conceptualize the processes to weaken it and if possible, annihilate it. However, all mainstream political parties evade annihilation of caste. The right-wing Hindutva forces do not recognize caste and its divisive consciousness because it benefits them and sustains their hegemony. Some among them prefer to camouflage caste by focusing on rituals and religious discourses. The Left refuses to recognize caste as it believes the feudal remnants of caste can be eliminated by engaging in class discourse. The Centrists thrive on the capitalist modernization and Brahmanical practices and make us believe that modernization and development will undermine caste. In fact, capitalists have not only failed in containing caste but rather ended up in promoting casteism.

The post-development discourse amply proves that caste and casteization of development deepened inequalities, not only in terms of class but also caste and gender. The socialist vision of the state has been sidelined and liberalization, privatization and corporatization have gained ground. The Right mainstreamed itself in the recent past and has come to power with the help of the slogan of development. All these persuasions believe in subtly promoting and sustaining caste and the domination of a few localized and subregional castes because the primary beneficiaries are themselves. This is happening everywhere from national to the regional and the subregional levels.

The alternatives are being worked out in terms of ideas and ideologies of social revolutionaries such as Phule, Ambedkar and Periyar who fought caste and its various forms of domination. They may be articulating through political platforms or civil society organizations but are clashing head-on with caste/casteism and its theoretical and ideological practices. However, one needs to recognize and prepare to fight caste even though it is deeply rooted in the psyche of the nation and has the capacity of manifesting itself in other forms.

In fact, it is difficult to understand and unravel the subtleties of casteist ideology and practices that are carried out in the name of state institutions, religious practices, in educational institutions, media campaigns, and so on. It is difficult to study the message sent through icons, idols, symbols, caricatures, texts, sermons, slogans and the various propaganda forms and the mind games played by the dominant.

The upper castes have been able to easily label reservation as anti-developmental since they own/control the various channels of communication despite the fact that reservation is a democratic measure that possesses the capacity of nation-building and pluralizing development and democracy. The voice of the marginalized can be very easily suppressed and negated by invoking spurious, imaginary and exclusivist campaigns. The well-meaning measure of reservation to empower the excluded has been obstructed by using the language of casteism, communalism and divisiveness. This has been possible because the entire nation has been casteized in different degrees. The dominant castes have all resources at their command including the state, capital and the media, which makes easy the tasks of suppressing dissent and opposition of the oppressed majority that is, the OBCs, SCs, STs, minorities, women and other social democrats.

## Conclusion

The move towards the right, both politically and economically, has been a great setback to the cause of the marginalized and oppressed people of India. Not that the assertion by these people was welcomed or encouraged by the traditionally socialist political parties, their governments and their policies. This was mainly because the oppressors of yore and the modern times are the same, the dominant castes. Yet the oppressed did manage to push their case ahead and achieved marginal gains in terms of reservation in jobs and educational institutions. A major setback to this process was in 1991 with India adopting economic reforms and setting in motion the process of liberalization, privatization and globalization (LPG). The very essence of LPG policies is to reduce the role of the state to the bare minimum in every aspect including planning and development and importantly, social welfare. The regulatory role of the state was also diluted, and thus the private sector began to dominate in the matters of industry, trade and commerce as the state began to withdraw. The World Bank and other international institutions and transnational corporates of the imperial First World are taking over the economic production and “nation building.” The marginalized and oppressed people have been the first victims of this domination of the private sector and the withdrawal of the state. The expanding private sector and the new economy have no compulsion or interest in implementing reservation in employment. There has been a clear role-reversal with the private/corporate sector beginning to dictate economic policies which, more often than not, are detrimental to the poor such as the OBCs, SCs and Adivasis. The net outcome is that though OBCs won the battle, in terms of reservation, they have lost the war.

Now the OBCs along with SCs and STs, are demanding the implementation of reservation in the private sector which was also recommended by the Mandal Commission. The victory of the OBCs in getting reservations after a long struggle is endangered in the new age of Corporate Imperialism. In the process, it has also exposed the casteist mind of the Indian State and the oppressed have realized that the answer to their problems lies in themselves that they need to fight until state power is democratized, promoting pluralistic politics and achieving structural changes, thus ensuring justice to the OBCs and the marginalized people. As the Mandal Commission Report said, “We must recognize that an essential part of the battle against social backwardness is to be fought in the minds of the backward people.”

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# 13

## BACKWARD CASTE MOVEMENT The Tamil Nadu experience

*K. A. Manikumar*

The French missionary Abbe Dubois who toured south India in the third decade of 19th century remarked that

better educated, more cunning, more keen witted, with greater talent for intrigue than other Hindus, the Brahmins had become indispensable not only to all the Hindu princes, but Mussulman princes too.... they have also been clever enough to work their way into favour with the British and occupy the highest and most lucrative posts in the different administrative boards and Government offices as well as in the judicial courts of the various districts.

(Dubois 2001)

In another two decades, that is, by the mid-19th century, they had established control over the entire district administration of the whole of the British Madras Presidency, accounting for about 90 percent of all the *huzur* (chief) sheristadars, 87 percent of all the *naib* (deputy) sheristadars and 75 percent of all the tahsildars; they thus accounted for 78 percent of all these positions taken together (Radhakrishnan 1989).

It is generally presumed, at least in northern states of India, that the non-Brahmin movement was essentially a lower-class movement and hence, the history of the Backward Caste Movement originates from date of the launch of the Justice Party in 1916 (which was the beginning of the Dravidian Movement). But history brings to light early movements of lower caste groups, notably Nadars and Vanniyars, which should be considered as forerunners of backward class movements. Besides, it has to be kept in mind that missionary and colonial officials created the objective conditions which facilitated the launch of the non-Brahmin movement in the second decade of 20th century claiming their share of seats in educational institutions and of jobs in government service.

The objective of this chapter is to attempt a comprehensive account of the Backward Caste Movement in Tamil Nadu since the beginning of British rule. There are seven sections in this chapter. The educational policy pursued by the British under Company and Crown rule is discussed in the first section. The second section dwells on the concern of the colonial bureaucracy over the preponderance of Brahmins in educational institutions and in the government's administrative structure, signaling the non-Brahmin educated individuals to protest

and demand their due share. In the third section, the aspirations and assertions of Nadars and Vanniyars, demanding a better deal in the then prevailing oppressive and hierarchical social order, are dealt with. The Justice Party's role in articulating the interests of non-Brahmins and its accomplishments are analyzed in the fourth section. The fifth and sixth sections highlight the essential features of the reports of two backward caste commissions set up in Tamil Nadu and their fallout. The separation of certain castes for special treatment within the class of backward and scheduled caste groups is the focus of the seventh section. The conclusion sums up the findings.

### **Educational policy pursued by the British under Company and Crown rule**

During the early days of the East India Company's rule, the Company government did not consider the promotion of education as its bounden duty. Later, when it decided to extend Western education to Indians, it was argued that "the circumstances existing in the country were not favourable to their taking definite action to elevate the Depressed Classes by way of education." The Bombay Governor M. Elphinstone wrote in a minute (March, 1824) thus:

They are not only the most despised but among the least numerous of the great divisions of society and it is to be feared that if our system of education first took root among them, it would never spread further and that we might find ourselves at the head of a new class superior to the rest in useful knowledge but hated and despised by the castes to whom their new attainments would always induce us to prefer them.<sup>1</sup>

Though conversion to Christianity facilitated entry of Indians into various administrative posts created by the colonial rulers, the court of Directors through their dispatch sent in 1814 had ordered exclusion of Indian Christians, drawn mostly from the "untouchable castes," from certain offices such as of "munsiff," "vakil" and law officer in the Bengal Presidency, and also of "sudder ameen" (civil judge) and Cavalry in the Madras Presidency.<sup>2</sup> The Committee of Public Instruction, Madras, soon after its formation (March, 1826), in a communiqué issued to the district officers had stated that "no measures can be pursued whatever other advantages they may offer, which are at variance with the customs and prejudices of the people."<sup>3</sup> The Madras Board for College and Public Instruction (appointed in December, 1826) could not positively decide on an application for admission it received in 1833 from a boy belonging to Parayar caste: The Board remarked that it did not deem it right

to decide of themselves whether a person of this class shall be admitted, in consequence of the strong repugnance evinced by the native headmasters to give instruction to Pariahs, and the knowledge that Hindoos of caste would consider their prejudices interfered with, were Pariahs taught in the same classes, with themselves.<sup>4</sup>

However, the Court of Directors, probably influenced by Macaulay's Minute of 1835, showed a change of mind in a clarification issued to the Sheriff of Madras in 1846:

The government do not recognize caste, or any religious distinction as a ground of civil disability, and all classes or castes, are, therefore, alike eligible to offices for which the Head of an office may consider them qualified, and their employment advantageous to the public interests.<sup>5</sup>

The Court of Directors in their dispatch of July 19, 1854, stated their intent to transmit “useful and practical knowledge” “to the great mass of the people who are utterly incapable of obtaining any education worthy of the name by their own unaided efforts.” Yet, the Department of Public Instruction set up in 1885–6, served only those keen on taking up employment in the public service. It did not bother to initiate steps for mass education even after the takeover of the Company administration by the Crown in the aftermath of Great Rebellion of 1857. Only in 1871, the colonial state deplored the state of Muslim education in India in a resolution of August 7, 1871, stating “so large and important a class ... should stand aloof from active co-operation” with its Western system of education. The government of Madras in a follow-up resolution of July 29, 1872, expressed the view that “the gradual disappearance of Muslims from public service was injurious ... to the vital interests of the Empire” (Radhakrishnan 1989). Thus, though not labelled as backward, Muslims were the first to be treated as a backward class in the Madras Presidency.

For a population comprising 6.4 percent of the total population, Muslims were only 1.8 percent of the total matriculates from 1858 to 1890, 0.9 percent of the total arts and professional graduates from 1861 to 1890, and 1.5 percent and 3.8 per of the total students in 1891 under higher and secondary education, respectively. In contrast, for a population of 3.7 percent, the corresponding figures for Brahmins were 60.2, 66.6, 66.5 and 42.5. As is evident only in primary education, the Muslim representation was close to their population percentage.<sup>6</sup> Muslims were only 2.7 percent of the officials in 1881 despite an increase of 12.5 percent over the preceding decade. In contrast, Brahmins were 60.2 percent and almost the same proportion as in 1872. Though by 1886, the representation of Muslims had increased, it was mostly in posts on salaries not exceeding Rs10 a month: In 1886, Muslim officials on salaries not exceeding Rs10 were 24.6 percent, while those who received salary exceeding Rs10 remained 4.2 percent. The corresponding figures for Brahmins around this time were 5.2 and 55.1 respectively, clearly indicating that the Brahmins were well entrenched in higher posts of the province.<sup>7</sup>

Inducements made in regard to their education led to the establishment of elementary Muslim schools and employment of those qualified among them in the public service.<sup>8</sup> Offers of scholarships, arrangements for teaching Urdu and Persian in any high school, providing training to Muslim teachers and admission of Muslim students in government schools with half-fee concession were the hallmarks of government support to Muslims. That the educational arrangement of the British had not touched the lower classes of the province even by the last decade of the 19th century is obvious from the report of the Director of Public Instruction (DPI) for the year 1880–1:

The small number of children of the lowest castes reading in schools is deplorable and shows how true the statement is that the present educational system has hitherto failed to reach the lowest classes of the population, the very classes for which in Europe popular elementary education is more especially designed. The classes who were taking advantage of schools, public and private throughout the country are the well-to-do... and not the masses of the labouring population<sup>9</sup>.

### **Concern over Brahmins in educational institutions and administrative structures**

Notwithstanding Queen Victoria’s proclamation of 1858 that all her “subjects, of whatever race or creed be freely and impartially admitted to office in our services, the duties of which they may be qualified by their education, ability, and integrity duly discharge,” was not translated

into action until the Western-educated nationalists agitated for Indianization of the imperial services in the latter half of 19th century (Saraswati 1963). The gradually implemented concept of Indianization of services did not help all the social groups alike since the practice of following hereditary occupations and lack of awareness had made a vast majority of the people incapable of accessing modern education. During the last decade of the 19th century, apart from Brahmins, a few elite castes notably, Mudaliyars, Vellalars, Chettiyars, Nairs, Reddys and Naidus could avail the opportunity provided by the colonial administrators. Yet, proportionate to the strength of the population the non-Brahmin upper-caste groups could not make educational progress and enter into services.<sup>10</sup> The Brahmins in contrast had acquired higher education and occupied all key positions meant for Indians.

The idea of arresting Brahmin dominance prior to the launch of the non-Brahmin movement had originated from officials of imperial government since the mid-19th century. It was mentioned in a government record of 1846 that “it is obviously inexpedient to permit any single class to monopolise the patronage of government. An increase in the proportion of appointments held by the great non-Brahmin portion of the Hindu Community would, therefore, be a ground for satisfaction.”<sup>11</sup> The Board of Revenue in a standing order issued in 1854, warned that the collectors should be careful to see that the subordinate appointments in their districts were not monopolized by the few influential families. It laid down that endeavor should always be made to divide the appointments in each district among the principal castes, “that a proportion of the Tasildars should belong to castes other than the Brahmins and that it should be a standing rule that the two chief Revenue servants in the Collector’s office should not belong to the same caste.”<sup>12</sup>

The standing order was evidently not strictly enforced. Ideas such as reduction of Brahmin preponderance or assistance to backward sections were articulated but there was nothing done even remotely like introducing communal preferences, or proportional representation in state services. In 1892, the competitive examinations were held for provincial civil services for the first time. The Madras government recommended to the central government for appointment not the Brahmin candidate who stood first in the examination but a non-Brahmin who stood next in the rank, stating that Brahmins were already “over-represented.” The government of British India refused to ratify this decision and ruled in no uncertain terms that candidates should be selected according to the order of merit, irrespective of caste and creed.<sup>13</sup>

When the strong presence of Brahmins was noticed by W. R. Cornish, the first census superintendent of Madras, his immediate remark was:

If the Brahmins really represented the feelings of their countrymen, and had any sympathy with, or desire for, the moral and material improvement of the people, outside their own small section of the community, no great harm would arise from their employment in the service of the state: but it is sufficiently notorious that, as a class, the Brahmins care mostly for their own advancement, and that they have no desire to see the lower classes educated or improved in social position.

Cornish was the first bureaucrat to urge the imperial government to limit the number of Brahmins in official positions and to encourage non-Brahmin Hindus and Muslims in larger proportion to such posts.<sup>14</sup>

The supporters of the non-Brahmin movement often cite the abuse of power indulged in by the Brahmin families in Nellore, Kadappa and Bellari. The Brahmins undoubtedly controlled the colonial administration and enjoyed enormous political clout. But it is wrong to assume that only Brahmins were pursuing their interests selfishly. Next to Brahmins, the people belonging

to castes that were in the forefront of the Justice Party, mostly from the upper strata of the non-Brahmin castes, were also behaving in a similar fashion. In 1866–7, the Collector of Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu, complained that in his district the “influences for evil” of the native officials had “grown far beyond his power to grapple with.” In Tirunelveli, as the Collector recorded, the caste “with whom every office in the district was crowded,” was Pillais, a non-Brahmin upper caste. The Board of Revenue subsequently ordered the collectors of neighboring districts to assist the Tirunelveli Collector by arranging for their transfers.<sup>15</sup>

In Thanjavur, following loss of crops caused by the 1884 rains and floods, the Collector proposed land revenue remissions to the extent of Rs8 lakhs in the following year. As this sum was far in excess of the remissions granted till then, the government appointed B. S. Thomas, a member of the Board of Revenue and a former Collector of Thanjavur, to probe whether such huge remissions were really warranted. His investigations revealed that nearly half the amount claimed was false. It was discovered that the officials had colluded in obtaining remissions on their and their relations’ lands. Following this exposure, the government dismissed 19 officials. Of them 13 were Brahmins. The remaining six belonged to non-Brahmin castes. Of them four were Pillais, and two Naidus. (Another non-Brahmin caste name is not mentioned.)<sup>16</sup> Such scandals involving non-Brahmin landholders, moneylenders, merchants and business class and their snobbish dislike for the lower strata of society merit a detailed study. But it will suffice to quote a non-Brahmin scholar K. B. Krishna’s apt remark here: “This [non-Brahmin] movement represents the emergence of the educated middle classes who are not Brahmins … The non-Brahmin professional classes are no more champions of social justice than the Brahmin professional classes” (Beteille 1970).

In 1871, the Brahmins were found to be more than 55 percent of the matriculated in the preceding 15 years, while numerically they formed only 3.5 percent<sup>17</sup> of the Presidency’s population. Commenting on this, the Census Superintendent W. R. Cornish wrote:<sup>18</sup>

Politically, it is not to the advantage of the Government that every question connected with the progress of the country should be viewed through the medium of Brahmin spectacles … The true policy of the state would be to limit their numbers in official positions and to encourage a large proportion of non-Brahmin Hindus and Muslims to enter official service, so as to allow no special pre-eminence or great preponderance of any particular caste.

By 1880, the percentage of Brahmins amongst matriculates and B.A. graduates in the Madras Presidency had increased to 59.9 percent and 63.8 percent respectively. Against this, the percentages of matriculates and BA graduates from “other Hindus” (non-Brahmins) were 23.7 percent and 16.0 percent respectively, against their population percentage of 87.9. Even this much amongst non-Brahmins must have been from its upper strata, as inferred by many scholars.<sup>19</sup> Of the students admitted to Guindy Engineering College, about 92 percent in 1899 and 79 to 93 percent during 1900–03 were Brahmins, who formed 3.5 percent of the total population in the Presidency. In view of the Brahmin preponderance, the Director of Public Instruction, the College Principal and the Education Department officials favored reservation for non-Brahmin castes, and in response the government increased the intake of the Engineering college from 15 to 20 students and ordered admission of not less than 25 percent of the candidates from non-Brahmin castes.<sup>20</sup> This seems to be the first decisive intervention of the colonial state in Madras over the issue of the dominance of Brahmins in education.

To estimate the relative progress made by different communities, the government in 1881 directed the compilation of statistics showing the number of officials of various castes in state ser-

vices. In posts fetching a monthly salary of above Rs10, the Brahmins who formed 3.5 percent of the population held 42.2 percent of the appointments, while the non-Brahmins who constituted 87.9 percent of population constituted 36.5 percent of the posts. In appointments with a monthly salary of less than Rs10, the non-Brahmins accounted for 55.4 percent while the representation of Brahmins was 19 percent; clearly, the Brahmins were entrenched in high-income posts.<sup>21</sup>

The Education Commission appointed in 1882, acting under pressures from missionary-educationists, dwelt at length on the social groups requiring special treatment. Classifying them as Mussalmans, aborigines (Scheduled Tribes), untouchable low castes (Scheduled Castes) and poor classes, the Commission placed on record its view that while the aborigines, untouchable low castes and the poor classes had hardly any access to the indigenous system of education because of either deliberate exclusion or extreme poverty, their condition was not any better under the British dispensation either. The Commission made two important recommendations for the education of the low castes:

- No boy be refused admission to a government college or school merely on the ground of caste.
- Generous support for the establishment of special schools or classes for children of low castes in places where a sufficient number of them are found to necessitate separate schools or classes, and where the schools already maintained from public funds do not provide adequately for their education.<sup>22</sup>

For the education of Muslims, the Commission's recommendations were comprehensive. As for the poorer classes, the Commission drew a distinction between the claims of the poor for primary and for higher education and stated that "while it is the duty of the state to extend primary education as widely as possible, in secondary and collegiate education, the state is concerned only with boys of promise." Exemption of payment of fees in special schools and scholarships in well-established schools and colleges were the other two important recommendations of the Commission.<sup>23</sup> The half-fee concession was extended to Muslims in all professional colleges in 1896 and the question of extending it to the backward or indigent classes was not raised until 1908. Therefore, it was with the introduction of these concessions in 1892 that the scramble for backward class status seems to have started.<sup>24</sup> The fee concession, however, was not allowed in private institutions. This privilege was granted in 1921 thanks to the initiative taken by Khan Bahadur Sir Usman Sahib (later a minister in the cabinet of Raja of Bobbili) in the Madras Legislative Council.<sup>25</sup>

The term "backward races" first appeared in 1883 report of the DPI. In the following year the phrase "backward or indigent races or castes," was used to recommend lower rates of fees in special localities and special rates of fees for pupils belonging to backward or indigent classes.<sup>26</sup> Meanwhile, most of the petitions seeking inclusion in the list of backward classes list for educational concessions, especially after the introduction of the half-fee concession in 1892, also sought representation in public service.<sup>27</sup>

The School Fee Notification of 1884, for the first time, provided for collection of lower rates of fees from pupils of backward classes. But its provision was enforced selectively. Saliyar and Kaikolar, as weaving communities, were denied this concession. The Mayavaram Municipality which supported their cause by passing a resolution on March 23, 1888, elicited a reply which smacks of lack of government empathy for the indigent artisanal class:

It will be very unfair to the poorest class of labourer who gets a monthly wage paid in grain, and it will be undoubtedly taken advantage of by every wealthy artisan who is

paid for his job. It will create endless jealousies and complaints and will break down the whole effect the school fee notification may have had or have in future. The scheme ... advantageous though it might be to encourage the children of the poorer artisans to come to school, no distinction can possibly be drawn between them and the children of other labouring classes.<sup>28</sup>

Despite repeated representations for about two decades, the inspecting officers, collectors, Director of Public Instruction and the Education Department all alike refused to include the artisan castes in the list on the ground that artisans as a class were neither poor nor educationally backward.<sup>29</sup>

In 1909, the Board of Revenue instructed the Registrar of Co-operative Societies that “not more than one half of the total number of superior appointments in an office should ordinarily be held by Brahmins, the other half being at least the due share of non-Brahmin Hindus, Indian Christians, Muhammadans and Eurasians.”<sup>30</sup> Finding that the proportion of Brahmins did not show any substantial decrease, in the following year the Board of Revenue asked the Registrar why he had not followed its instructions and why the power of making appointments should not be withdrawn from him. It also ordered that until the proportion of Brahmins was reduced to nearly 50 percent of the total strength he should appoint fully qualified non-Brahmins in preference to Brahmins.

The question of communal representation in state services was formally raised and publicly discussed for the first time when the Royal Commission on Public Services, instituted in 1912 to examine and report on the Indian participation in civil services, visited Madras in 1913. The Commission thoroughly investigated all aspects of the civil services, particularly the question of instituting simultaneous examinations in England and India. The Commission sat in Madras on January 8–18, 1913. Forty-two witnesses were examined, of whom 19 were officials and 23 non-officials. Classified according to caste, 19 were Brahmins, seven non-Brahmin Hindus, two Muslims, three Christians and the rest Europeans. Eight witnesses supported fully the principle of class representation and 17 rejected it outright.<sup>31</sup>

The prospect of holding civil service examinations in India should have cheered every Indian since there were several difficulties in writing the examination in London. But while the Muslims feared that this would pave the way for Hindu domination, the non-Brahmin Hindus in the Madras Presidency saw in it the danger of Brahmin dominance. Therefore, the demand for communal representation in services was raised.<sup>32</sup> Representing the Muslim League in the Madras Presidency Yakub Hasan, later a minister in the Rajaji Cabinet of 1937–9, pleaded that it was “absolutely necessary that all classes and communities should be duly represented in the provincial services” and suggested recourse to direct recruitments to rectify communal inequalities. Instead of pressing for a greater share for Indians in the civil service, the occasion was used to stress the need for equitable distribution of responsible positions among members of the principal castes and creeds (Royal Commission on Public Service in India 1913).

The critics of the idea of communal representation in civil services were Brahmins such as S. Kasturiranga Ayyankar, the Editor of *The Hindu*, G. A. Natesan, the Editor of *Indian Review*, Diwan Bahadur P. Raja Gopalachariar, the Dewan of Travancore, V. S. Srinivasa Sastry and V. K. Ramajujachariar. Their contention was that merit and efficiency and not birth, should be the criterion in selecting respective officers. Communal consideration, it was feared, would “lower prestige of the service” and introduce an element of discontent in the service itself. Some non-Brahmin spokespersons who insisted on the adoption of the communal principle, were not willing to extend it to the “panchamas.” A witness before the Commission (T. Balaji Rao Nayudu)

who pleaded for special representation for non-Brahmins, said “Panchamas should be given their share when they become fit.”

Sir Alexander Cardew, a member of the Governor’s Executive Council said, “It is impossible to apply a system of open competition to the recruitment of the civil service in India unless a monopoly is to be accorded to the Brahmins.” He suggested that a fixed percentage of vacancies might be assigned for different communities and competition be restricted to members of the same communities.<sup>33</sup> The Madras government reported in 1913, that all the officers appointed after the competitive examinations of 1893–5 were, with one exception, Brahmins. Out of the total of deputy collectors in the Presidency, the Brahmins accounted for 53 percent in 1896 and 55 percent in 1912. In the judicial branch in 1912, out of the 18 permanent sub-judges, 83.3 percent were Brahmins while among the permanent district munisifs, 73.8 percent were Brahmins.<sup>34</sup>

In terms of education, the non-Brahmin Hindus who comprised 86.6 percent of the population (including paraiyars and similar other untouchable castes or the present Scheduled Castes who had not then emerged as a separate category), accounted for only 23.5 percent of the total matriculates, and 19.8 percent of the total arts and professional graduates from 1858–61 to 1916. They accounted for 20.4 percent and 40.2 percent of the total students in higher and secondary education, respectively. Even in primary education, their representation (74.9 percent) was below their population percentage.<sup>35</sup> In 1914, 452 out of 650 registered graduates of the University of Madras were Brahmins.<sup>36</sup> Pointing out the extraordinary ability of Brahmin boys in passing examinations, the government recommended that the proportion of Brahmins in educational institutions shall not exceed 50 percent.

A list of Poor Classes was drawn up when the Grant-in-Aid Code was prepared in 1885. It came up for revision in 1906. The list was further expanded in 1913.<sup>37</sup> In 1925, in response to the demand of the South Indian Depressed Classes Conference for separating Panchamas from the backward classes in educational matters, the government split the backward classes list into two: 1) The “Depressed Classes” comprised 85 communities consisting of the Panchamas and the tribals; 2) “Castes other than Depressed Classes” comprised 87 communities.<sup>38</sup> An important characteristic of the list was that different communities could be added to it but could not be removed once added. In 1940, the government removed eight of the communities from the list. But the action could not be sustained and under protests and pressures, all of them were soon restored in the list.<sup>39</sup> Over a century, the decennial lists of backward classes had increased from 11 castes in 1883 to 323 in 1988.<sup>40</sup>

Dr B. R. Ambedkar pointed out that each local government determined whether a community or caste group was backward or not since the condition of different caste groups varied from region to region. In 1918, the Mysore government appointed a committee to enquire into the condition of the “backward communities,” which were defined as “all communities other than Brahmins” (Galanter). In Mysore, from 1921 until well after independence, the Backward Class included everybody except the Brahmins and those whose mother tongue was English. This roughly worked out to 96 percent of the population (Dushkin). Until 1924, the term “Depressed Classes” carried a wider meaning and it included “aboriginal tribes, the Criminal tribes and some other wandering and backward castes.” In Bombay, by the close of the decade, the term Depressed Classes had meant untouchables (Galanter). In Madras, the term Backward Classes referred to the castes above the untouchables in caste hierarchy.

### **Aspirations and assertions of Nadars and Vanniyars**

Individual caste identity did not come to the public sphere until early 19th century, and the conflict that posed a serious threat to public peace was between left-wing and right-wing factions.

This division, though rooted in a clash of interests between land-owning communities on the one hand, and the traders, merchants and artisans on the other, sustained because of the opposition the former had to people using certain privileges which they claimed as their preserve. The point of dispute was over the right to use flags in the temple car, or to have a trumpet blowing in front of a procession or ride through the streets in a palanquin or on horseback during marriage celebrations. Disputes between the two groups intensified in the newly created urban spaces associated with the European commercial enterprises. However, this conflict ended by the end of 19th century as the colonial administration dealt with it as a law-and-order problem (Dirks 2013).

Missionaries put caste at the forefront of debates over social change, though their concern was primarily with conversion. The missionary critiques of caste spread through Christian schools and Church. Jotirao Phule, the prime mover in anti-Brahmin and anti-caste movements in Maharashtra in the late 19th century, had been influenced greatly by Missionary educators.<sup>41</sup> Tamil Nadu had Caldwell who was an Anglican Bishop of Tirunelveli that covered major parts of south Tamil Nadu during the high noon of British rule. His approach was not only evangelical but imperialistic as well. Like any other evangelical he adopted the “Brahman-tyrant model” to further both the evangelical and imperial interests of Great Britain. We must not forget that Caldwell was theorizing when racial ideas were becoming prominent in the Western political discourse of the 19th century. Until then “Dravidian” had been used more as a linguistic and geographical expression. Caldwell equated it with the race. His equation of language and race has been critiqued by Max Mueller and other German scholars.

Caldwell’s postulation of a racial dichotomy between Brahmins and non-Brahmins and his view that Tamil belonged to the Dravidian family of languages suited the developing political processes in Dravidian Land (Tamil Nadu). Tamil scholars could deploy his writings to promote Tamil linguistic and cultural revivalism against Sanskritic revivalism, which had done good to the region and the people at a particular point of time (Helman-Rajanayagam 2003). It was because of Caldwell’s virulent anti-Brahminism that Brahmins became increasingly inscribed as outsiders to Tamil culture and civilization. He was responsible for the exclusion of Brahmins from the core features of linguistically-based Tamil nationalism (Dirks 2013).

Even long before the government ordered a census exercise and the Justice Party challenged the caste-based hegemony, there were some subaltern social groups which, pursuing the path of Sanskritization, resisted caste oppression and conducted social movement against caste hierarchy and the superiority claimed by Brahmins and some other dominant caste groups, belonging mostly to upper strata of society. Powerful associations that began to emerge among certain non-Brahmin castes from the end of the 19th century addressed themselves to social reform within the caste and sought to secure a better position for the caste in the wider society. A good example is the Nadar Mahajana Sangam in the southern districts which agitated successfully for the rights of temple entry for the Nadars. The scramble for forsaking the degraded position and attaining a higher caste status or the struggle to be classed among Aryans or Kshatriyans, inventing myths and legends became characteristic of every “untouchable caste” that pursued the path of Sanskritization in the past. Nadars were no exception to this.

Nadars were credited with conducting the first social protest movement in southern parts of Tamil Nadu. Their first form of protest was by embracing Christianity. Conversion helped them to access English education and the resultant economic empowerment. The contribution of European Christian missionaries to this phenomenon was praiseworthy. Those who did not opt for conversion and chose to remain in the Hindu fold later earned the trust and goodwill of the European mercantile class. Under their patronage, they took to petty trade and stockbroking and progressed economically. Economically well-off Hindu Nadars soon started asserting their rights

in the socio-cultural spheres. They conducted a number of temple entry programs in the latter half of the 19th century leading to clashes with the “upper” caste people. Their militancy and solidarity were well on display when they, defying the social customs, tried to enter the temples, starting from Tiruchendur (1872) through Madurai (1874), Tiruthangal (1876), Kamudhi (1897) and finally culminating in Sivakasi (1899) (Manikumar 1999).

A small socially and economically advanced section of the Nadar community, claiming to be descendants of “Suryavamshi” lineage, had demanded Kshatriya status since the mid-19th century. In response to a series of petitions from the Nadars, the Commissioner noted in 1891 that they were “usually placed a little above the Pallars and Paraiyars and were considered to be one of the polluting castes, but, of late, many have put forward the claim to be considered Kshatriyas and at least 24,000 of them appear as Kshatriyas in the caste tables.”

The Commissioner held their claim absurd, but the Nadars persisted in the claim and their campaign for temple entry eventually led to a legal battle between the Maravar Raja of Ramanathapuram and the Nadar community (Galanter 1972).

The Nadar defendants in the Kamudhi Temple Entry Case claimed in their affidavit that they had descended from a warrior caste. Two English judges of the Madras High Court, otherwise sympathetic to the Nadars, said,

there is no sort of proof, nothing we may say that even suggests a probability that the Shanars are (as Nadars were known then), as the defendants contend, descended from the Kshatriyas or warrior caste of Hindus or from the Pandya, Chola or Chera race of kings and the futile attempt of the Shanars to establish the connection has brought well-deserved ridicule on their pretensions.

*(Pillai 2008)*

In the *Sankaralinga Nadar vs Raja Rajeswara Dori* case, the Privy Council upheld the exclusion of Nadars from Kamudhi temple and granted damages (Rs500) for its purification “after a careful scrutiny of their social standing.” Finding their position in general social estimation just above that of Pallars, Parayars and Chakliyars (who are regarded as unclean and therefore, prohibited from the entry into Hindu temples), and below that of the Vellalars, Maravars and other cultivating castes usually classified as Shudras, who are free to worship in the Hindu temples, the court concluded that “the presence of Shanans was repugnant to the religious principles of the Hindu worship of Shiva as well as the sentiments and customs of the caste Hindu worshipper” (Galanter 1972).

Whatever the motive behind the government’s decision to undertake a census of population in the country, when caste became the basic unit to organize population counts, caste was politicized. Caste associations sprang up to contest their assigned position in the official hierarchy, holding meetings, writing petitions and organizing protests. As the British could no longer ignore the political fallout of the census, they abandoned the use of caste for census-counting altogether (Dirks 2013). The Nadar Mahajana Sangam succeeded in registering themselves as Nadar Kshatriyas in the 1921 census (Desai 1985). G. T. Boag wrote that “the Shanar of 1911 now appears as a Nadar; this is done under orders of the Government of Madras that the word Shanar should cease to be used in official records ... in deference to the wishes of the Nadar community” (Dirks 2013).

In 1913, the caste name of Nadars appeared in the list of Backward Classes. The economically advanced section of the Nadar community that dominated the Nadar Mahajana Sangam protested and made a request in 1917 to delete the caste name from the list. Thanks to their social movement and the self-respect movement that emboldened the Nadars to assert their

rights, Nadars could cross the pollution line and they were not listed in the Schedule prepared and attached to the 1935 Act. However, soon they realized their stupidity of forsaking the claim of backward class. The Sangam pleaded with the Madras government to include Nadars in the list of Backward Classes in 1935 and 1940, a demand conceded only in 1957.<sup>42</sup> Nadar Mahajana Sangam did not transform into a political party, like Vanniyakula Kshatriya Maha Sangam.

Like the Nadars, another caste group which claimed superior status and fought against being treated as a low caste was the Vanniar. The Vanniars (referred to *pallis* in old British records) claiming “Agnikula,” the fire race, and descendants of the Pallava dynasty, floated an association as early as 1888 called Chennai Vanniyakula Kshatriya Maha Sangam (Vidyasagar 1988). In 1901, the Madras Census Commissioner noted that “they claim for themselves a position higher than that which Hindu society is inclined to accord them,” adding that they were working to achieve this status through a widespread organization engineered from Madras. The Madras Census Commissioner in 1911 wrote that the

irritation produced by the social precedence tables of 1901, which has found vigorous expression on the part of many, no longer willing to admit their polluting abilities in black and white ... Thus the Shanans of Tinnevelly, no longer content to “pollute without eating beef” claim to be Kshatriyas, as do the slightly polluting Pallis.

(Dirks 2013)

Although initial efforts to attain appropriate recognition in the census were unsuccessful, by 1921 pressures from the Vanniar community led the Madras census to drop caste occupations. By 1931, the term “Palli” had disappeared altogether from the census and only the Vanniyakula Kshatriyas, a new honorific title remained. In 1935, the Vanniyakula Kshatriyas petitioned for proportional representation in backward-class reservations for Madras.<sup>43</sup> In a memorandum in July 1938, the Vanniyakula Kshatriya Maha Sangam of Madras represented to the Prime Minister (Chief Minister of the Presidency was Prime Minister at that time) Rajaji that despite having more than 200 graduates, Vanniyars had only six of the 1,713 gazetted officers. The Vanniyars’ main demands were for their recognition as a separate community for communal reservation, relaxation of the age limit for entry into the services, and preference in appointments to local bodies. The memorandum also requested that the Prime Minister give its deputation a hearing (Radhakrishnan 1997). But Rajaji was not in favor of considering any caste-based issue. In the post-independence period, Vanniyars became very assertive and in 1952 their organizations based in North Arcot and South Arcot pressed for appointments in civil services proportionately to the Vanniyar population and nominations to local and legislative bodies.

Vanniyakula Kshatriya Maha Sangam, independent of the Congress Party, captured 22 out of 52 seats in the South Arcot district board elections. With the general elections of 1952 in mind, the Vanniyars formed their own political party, the Tamil Nadu Toilers Party in 1951 under the leadership of N. A. Manickavelu Naicker, a lawyer, and S. S. Ramasamy Padayachi. Later, Manickavelu Naicker quit and formed another party, the Common Weal Party. This party was based in the two districts of North Arcot and Chengalpattu whereas the Tamil Nadu Toilers Party was strong in South Arcot and Salem districts.<sup>44</sup> These parties together won 25 seats in the Legislative Assembly in 1952 and since the Congress Party was short of an absolute majority to form the government, the two Vanniyar parties were made to cooperate with Congress. In return, both Vanniyar party leaders were inducted into the cabinet. Once inside the ministry, one after the other, both parties were dissolved by their leaders and they joined Congress en masse.<sup>45</sup> The movement of Vanniyars re-emerged

after about 30 years under the leadership of Dr Ramadoss with his newfound outfit Pattali Makkal Katchi (Party of Proletarians).

Apart from Nadars and Vanniyars, there were several more social groups who asserted their rights. One group—of relatively low ritual status—which originally claimed to be Brahmins but later asked for backward status under the British, were the Saurashtra weaving community in Madurai. Ever since they were brought to Madurai in the 16th century by the Vijayanagar Nayaks, they had repeatedly claimed to be Brahmins. However, in the latter part of the 19th century when the government of Madras began establishing its ad hoc list for backward groups, the Saurashtras also claimed a position on this list. But the Director of Public Instruction held this claim unacceptable. Having been recognized (in 1892) as a backward class falling under Pattnulugars (silk weavers), they had ceased to claim the status of Brahmins. The manager of the Saurashtra School in Madurai was sending returns (data of students) to government, mentioning the caste of students as Saurashtra Brahmins. The management was informed that “they cannot continue to enjoy the privileges accorded under the grant-in-aid code to schools intended for backward classes,” if his pupils were mentioned in returns as Brahmins (Irschick 1985).

The Viswakarmas Association in Madras in 1897 (artisanal classes like goldsmith, brass smith, carpenter, stone mason and blacksmith, also known as Kammalars), was yet another caste group to eloquently express its resentment against Brahmin preponderance in public services:

One class, by undue preponderance in the public service absorbs the vast resources coming from the sweat of all classes and set apart for those services; this places it in a position to educate itself, and it again absorbs such other resources of the country, set apart for public instruction. Public monies are thus doubly locked up and, for want of legitimate use, fail to exert their regenerating influences on all the contributing classes.<sup>46</sup>

The members of the Tirunelveli district’s community unit, who once took pride in calling themselves Brahmins, in 1902 pointed out that “public service was fully and skillfully shut out to them through the particular and peculiar revenging spite of the Brahmins, and, surrounded by them, the British officials were being entirely misled.”<sup>47</sup>

A conference of Tirunelveli district unit of Kammalas (Vishwakarma caste), urged the government to include the community in the list of Scheduled Castes. Having failed in its effort, the representatives of this community made a suggestion that their caste could be grouped along with Vanniyakula Kshatriyas, Setti Balijas, Nadars and such others and be given special treatment as Backward Hindu Communities. It was only in 1950, in post-independence period, the community succeeded in getting included in the list of backward classes in the Madras Educational Rules (Beteille 1970).

Many Yadavas began to feel upset that they had been included in the non-Brahmin category, where they felt their chances for recruitment into government service were poor. Many also wanted seats reserved for Yadavas in the local boards just as they were for Muslims, Christians, untouchables and others. But their organization was unable mobilize its ranks for political support like the Vanniyakkula Kshatriya Sangam.<sup>48</sup>

As early as 1891, Ayothidas Pandithar, a prominent Dalit-Buddhist intellectual of the day had founded the Dravida Mahajana Sangam and from 1907, edited a newspaper called *Oru Paisa Tamizhan*. Men like Ayothidas, while conscious of backward caste oppression of Dalits, nevertheless, were convinced that an ideological struggle against Brahmins and Brahminism would inevitably lead to a Shudra-Panchama alliance. So he, like Mahatma Jotirao Phule, stressed on

the importance of such an alliance. M. C. Raja as a Dalit leader supported the Justice Party in its early phase, but soon the Buckingham and Carnatic Mill strike in 1921 exposed the fragile nature of the alliance in the face of the “complex configuration of class–caste forces.” He withdrew his support to the Justice Party (Geetha and Rajadurai 1993).

### **Justice Party’s role in articulating the interests and accomplishments of non-Brahmins**

The Justice Party championed the interests of non-Brahmins and demanded equitable representation for them in educational institutions, in local bodies and in the government services. In his address to the Non-Brahmin Conference in July 1921, K.V. Reddi Naidu said,

“The great non-Brahmin movement transcended over caste, over religion and over the language.” True to his claim, the Justice Party transcended caste and religion, and attracted “Mohammedans,” Christians, Hindus and Panchamas.

*(Beteille 1970)*

Thus, the Justice Party claimed to speak on behalf of the 40 million non-Brahmins of the Madras Presidency. But as Andre Beteille rightly observed,

It would be a mistake to identify it with the interests of the non-Brahmins as a whole. First of all, the 40 million non-Brahmins on whose behalf the Party claimed to speak included Muslims as well as Dalits and people belonging to three language groups, Tamil, Telugu and Malayalam. Besides, non-Brahmins were a very heterogeneous group and those who organized and led the non-Brahmin movement in its first phase were drawn from the elite section of the society. Those involved in Justice politics were drawn from the upper crust of non-Brahmin castes such as Mudaliyars, Chettiyars and Vellalars among the Tamils; Rajus, Reddis and Naidus among the Telugus; and Nairs among the Malayalis. In the Tamil districts, large non-Brahmin castes like Vanniyars, Nadars and Thevars were hardly represented in the Party. The Justice Party actually was dominated by the urban, Western-educated, land-owning and professional class. It was a formidable array of Rajas, zamindars, industrialists, lawyers and doctors. It was by no means a mass party. It did not bother to address the issues of peasants and workers and draw the masses in its outfit.<sup>49</sup>

Robert Hardgrave had the following to state about the Justice Party:

The leadership, financially well-endowed, was drawn almost exclusively from a socially stable element of the urban population; While Chetty, Nair, Mudaliar and the early leaders of the movement spoke of the illiterate non-Brahmin masses of Madras, they in no way represented them ... With the franchise limited to but a few hundred thousand, the party made little attempt to aggregate support at any wider level. Its demands were formulated, not so much to attract a following, as to influence the official policy of the British in Madras Presidency.

*(Beteille 1970)*

The British government, however, was not interested in providing proportional reservation to accommodate the lower strata of society. Even as late as August 1917, a conference of district

collectors, held to consider the question of appointing to the public services members of communities considered backward and unrepresented, decided that while it was desirable to have all communities in the services, it was not possible to allot appointments in fixed proportions to various communities. At the same time, the government, in order to enable the communities to qualify themselves for all posts, diluted the rigor of various entrance and special tests conducted and reduced the minimum qualification required for admission to them.<sup>50</sup>

The non-Brahmin movement derived its momentum from the overwhelmingly Brahmin composition of the Home Rule Movement, which was spearheaded in Madras by Annie Besant. The manifesto published by T. M. Nair and P. Thyagaraya Chetti asserted that “the time has come when an attempt should be made to define the attitude of the several important non-Brahman Indian communities in this Presidency toward what is called the Indian Home Rule Movement.” Expressing concern over the dominance of Brahmins in the realm of higher education and administrative positions, the manifesto said:

why a small class which shows a larger percentage of English-knowing men than their neighbours, should be allowed almost to absorb all the government appointments, great and small, high and low, to the exclusion of the latter among whom may also be found, though in small proportions, men of capacity, enlightenment and culture.

*(Dirks 2013)*

The manifesto issued by the South Indian Liberal Federation in 1916 contained statistical data to highlight the predominance of Brahmins in all departments of the government. The manifesto declared that this should be ended as the non-Brahmin Hindus “by number, ability and taxpaying capacity” were entitled to predominate.

When the Justice Party came to power in 1920, it passed a resolution in the State Legislative Council recommending to the government to take steps to increase the proportion of posts in government offices held by non-Brahmins (Beteille 1970). The Public Department issued an order in 1922 regulating recruitment to services on a communal basis and prescribing a definite quota for different categories of posts under the government. It was decided that a unit of 12 appointments should be so filled, in order to ensure equal opportunities for service under government for different categories, provided qualified and suitable candidates were available for the communities recognized for the purpose in the following manner (Beteille 1970):

Non-Brahman Hindus: Five places out of 12.

Brahmans: Two out of 12.

Muslims: Two out of 12.

Anglo Indians and Christians, including Europeans: Two out of 12.

Others, including the Depressed Classes: One out of 12.

The Staff Selection Board of the Department of Education, in framing its list of selections, both for clerical and for executive posts, followed the proportions of communal representation, as stated below:

Non-Brahmans: 40%.

Muslims: 20%.

Brahmans: 20%.

Anglo Indians and Indian Christians: 10%.

Depressed Classes and others: 10%.<sup>51</sup>

In 1929, the Madras Public Services Commission recruited public servants according to these quotas (Irschick 1985). Several attempts were made to create a political group *vis-à-vis* the Justice Party to claim the status of Backward Class. For instance, on March 21, 1932, several members of the Madras Legislative Council met to form an association called the Backward Classes League. They argued that the population had a total of 17 million individuals who were backward in the Presidency's population of about 46 million. Among those present that day were M. A. Manickavelu Naicker, P. K. Ramachandra Padayachi and Subedar Major Nanjappah, all from Vanniarkula Kshatriyan community; and H. B. Ari Gowder, a member of the tribal Padaga community in the Nilgiri Hills. M. A. Manickavelu Naicker particularly demanded that the government divide the Hindu population as "Forward" (Brahmins and non-Brahmins) and "Backward" (classes other than Depressed Classes) and reserve a quota only for the "Backward" (Irschick 1985).

C. Basudev, though he belonged to upper-caste Balija Naidu, along with a delegation, met A.Y. G. Campbell, the Revenue Member of the Madras Executive Council who was in charge of the operation of the Communal Quota System in government service recruitment and pleaded for a separate quota for "backward Hindus," claiming that the then existing communal quota had benefited only the upper strata amongst non-Brahmins namely Reddis, Vellalars and Malayalis. Campbell was sympathetic and in agreement with the lobbyists and thought that the creation of a quota would help to relieve the anxiety "on the part of a substantial section of the community that they cannot, in the existing circumstances, get their fair share in the administration of the country and that they are, in consequence, liable to oppression." G.T. H. Bracken, the Chief Secretary, however, held the contrary view that once a new quota for these backward classes was established, the better educated and wealthier among them would monopolize it. Moreover, satisfying one claim would provoke others and would "further complicate administrative arrangements."

When the government did not concede the demand in 1930s, the Secretary of the Vanniarkula Kshatriya Maha Sangam, V. Chokkalingam Nayakar, questioned the British notion of fairness saying, "the word non-Brahmin is a loose and mischievous term and is used by politicians to suit their convenience."

From 1925 onwards, the Self-Respect Movement of Periyar E. V. R. began to make concerted efforts to question the domination of the Brahmins in the social and religious spheres. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, it gained support from a cross-section of society, becoming particularly a bastion of the intermediate castes. In 1944, Periyar launched the Dravidar Kazhagam that spearheaded a militant anti-Brahminism (Beteille 1970). The followers of Periyar rejected the ritual services of the Brahmin priest, attacked Brahminical deities and mythology and burnt Brahminical scriptures. They extolled the virtues of Dravidian deities, Tamil culture and mythology, thereby gaining self-respect and self-confidence.<sup>52</sup>

In the background of work done by the Justice Party and Periyar, even the Congress Party headed by Rajaji that formed the ministry in the Presidency in 1937 adopted and even extended the government recruitment system based on communal quotas. The acceptance of communal quotas by the party leadership was a way forward for the Congress Party (Irschick 1985). The Justice Party's communal orders that dictated quotas for caste recruitment were later codified through a roster system that operated until 1947, providing a precedent for strong backward class legislation on reservations in Tamil Nadu after independence (Dirks 2013).

Non-Brahmin dominance in the organs of state and municipal government began during the period when the Justice Party was in office under dyarchy. Yet in the villages, the situation did not appear to have changed for many more years. Brahmin-dominated villages did not witness a transformation comparable to that taking place in the provincial legislature and municipal

bodies. For instance, in Sripuram, a village surveyed by Andre Beteille, the Brahmins continued to enjoy decisive dominance and controlled the panchayat well into the 1940s. It was only after the introduction of adult franchise and particularly of Panchayat Raj that the Brahmins lost their dominance. Yet as Beteille writes:

By this time the Justice Party had been almost forgotten .... Yet it would be mistake to minimise the role of the Justice Party and the Non-Brahmin movement of the twenties. The Party not only prepared the ground for the induction of new social strata into the political system but also created a distinctive idiom for South Indian politics. This idiom remained as a crucial element in the political process long after the Justice Party itself disintegrated. It permeated every kind of political organization including the Congress Party.

(Beteille 1970)

The loss of power and political authority suffered by Brahmins is well attested by their representation in the Madras Legislature. In 1937, there were 37 Brahmins in the Madras Legislative Assembly that had 215 members which constituted 17.2 percent. By 1952, the percentage of Brahmins in the Assembly had dropped to five, and after the separation of Andhra their number further fell to just one (Irschick 1985).

### **Kakar Kalekar Commission's Report**

After independence, following pressure from many caste outfits including the Backward Classes League, the government revised the Communal Government Order (GO) in November 1947. In a unit of 14 appointments, the revised GO allocated six (42.9 percent) to forward non-Brahmin Hindus, two (14.3 percent) each to backward Hindus, Brahmins and Scheduled Castes (SCs), and one (7.1 percent) each to Anglo-Indians/Christians and Muslims.<sup>53</sup> In the constitution adopted in 1950, the specific provisions intended to safeguard the interests of Backward Classes are Articles 15(4), 16(4), 320(4) and 340. Following a case filed by Chempagam Durairajan in the Madras High Court that set aside the communal reservation systems, the first organized demands for protecting the “Communal GO” was a vigorous campaign undertaken by Periyar E. V. R, his party Dravida Kazhagam, and its organ *Viduthalai*. August 14, 1950, was observed as Communal GO Day, with strikes by students, hartal by merchants, processions and rallies by the party ranks. Speaking on the occasion, Periyar declared his intention to launch an all-party agitation for the reintroduction of the GO providing reservation for every community strictly according to its numerical strength.<sup>54</sup>

While the Madras government’s appeal against the High Court ruling assuaged the agitated feelings for some time, the Supreme Court judgment of March 1951 upholding it again caused considerable commotion. Partly out of a conviction that the GO, in existence for over two decades, was indispensable for rendering justice to the less advanced communities, and partly for fear of social unrest, the Madras Assembly carried a resolution moved by the Chief Minister in April 1951. It authorized the government “to adopt such measures as are necessary for admission to the Government professional colleges and appointments in Government services as will conduce to the welfare of all classes of citizens.” Armed with this resolution, the Chief Minister and other ministers rushed to Delhi seeking an amendment to the constitution. Meanwhile, the ministry concerned had received a spate of telegrams, letters and resolutions of meetings and conferences from several individuals and associations urging immediate action. Their requests included retention of the GO for at least ten to 15 years, reservation for the backward classes

according to their population, and classification of the entire population into forward, backward and SCs, with reservation of 30 percent, 55 percent, and 15 percent, respectively.

It was in this context that the Kaka Kalelkar Commission was constituted by the central government. The Commission, in its report submitted in March 1955, listed 2,399 communities as backward, with 837 of them as “most backward.” For the advancement of these communities, it made several recommendations, in particular, reservation of at least 25 percent of jobs in Class 1, 33.3 percent in Class 2 and 40 percent in Classes 3 and 4; and 70 percent of seats in all technical and professional institutions. The Madras government, in the meantime, revised the then existing rule relating to representation of several communities in public services. Under the new system ordered in 1951, a cycle of 20 appointments was taken as a unit, out of which three were reserved for SCs and Scheduled Tribes (STs) and five for Backward Classes and the rest were filled on the basis of merit. After the separation of The Andhra region as a separate state, it was decided in 1954 that in future the reservation should be made as follows: SCs and STs: 16 percent; Backward Classes: 25 percent; Open Competition: 59 percent. This time 25 appointments were made out to be one unit or one cycle (The Report of the Backward Classes Commission 1971).

The Congress government under Kamaraj approved a list of Most Backward Classes and extended the educational concessions until then admissible to SCs to the students of Most Backward Classes. This measure was adopted in the state from the academic year 1957–8. This became possible as Kamaraj, in response to the demand of the washermen to treat them on par with the SCs, ordered investigation based on which 29 castes were brought into the category of Most Backward Classes (The Report of the Backward Classes Commission 1971). Limited educational concessions were admissible to these Most Backward Classes, and they had no separate reservations for appointments or for admissions to colleges, nor did they enjoy scholarships on par with the SCs.

### **TamilNadu Backward ClassesCommission’s Report**

The Tamil Nadu Backward Classes Commission with A. N. Sattanathan as Chairperson was constituted by the Dravida Munnetra Kazagam (DMK) ministry headed by M. Karunanidhi on November 13, 1969. Two retired District and Sessions Judges S. Chinnappan and M. A. Jamal Hussain were the two members of this Commission. The Director of Backward Classes, Government of Tamil Nadu was its Member-Secretary. The Commission was asked to assess the progress made by each of the class that were listed by the state government as Backward Classes and Most Backward Classes; the focus was to study the progress in the three spheres of education, economic status and employment in government service (The Report of the Backward Classes Commission 1971). The Commission submitted its report in 1971. Apart from the recommendations, the Commission also made a number of suggestions in the report. For instance, the Commission said, “there must be a device for skimming off top layers periodically, enabling the still lower strata of the same caste to come up without having to be forced down by the more competent aid recipients of their own caste.”<sup>55</sup> In its opinion, a most backward class or Scheduled Caste family with one or at the most two generations of affluence, and public or government should not stand in need of any further favors from government. Another striking suggestion was that the cost involved in providing these equal opportunities must be treated as a first charge on the state and contributing to this cost should be viewed as a moral and social obligation of the privileged and better-off sections of society, not merely as a penalty for the exploitation they and other social evils that they perpetrated on the lower castes for centuries. The Sattanathan Commission wanted the use of the loaded words “Brahmin” and

“non-Brahmin” to be avoided and to ensure that backwardness alone would be the criterion for reservation.<sup>56</sup>

The Commission noted that the members of the Backward Classes and Scheduled Castes continue to remain largely as tenants, farm laborers, and artisans and service castes contributing to the village economy. Yet it found nearly 70 percent of the population of the cultivating castes, such as Padayachi, Kallar, Maravar, Valiyans, Ambalakarans, Boyas, Kaikola and numerous smaller castes including barbers and washermen living in conditions of abject poverty and under conditions hardly distinguishable from those prevailing amongst the Scheduled Castes before independence.<sup>57</sup>

Sattanathan stayed in Tirunelveli for three days and one day in Courtallam (from February 4 to 7, 1970). There he met the school principals and educational officials and sought the status of the students of Backward Communities and their performance. In terms of the performance of these students, the impression gained by Sattanathan was, “though boys of the backward communities are showing steady improvement, many of the best places in the examinations are still taken by the forward communities” (Government of Tamil Nadu 1975). All the educational officers and principals complained that false certificates of income were produced frequently and some method of checking the income of the parents should be devised. There is also suspicion that sometimes even caste names were changed by adopting the name of the subcaste which was on the list. In the matter of income certificates, the sufferers were the salaried servants and beneficiaries invariably happened to be the landlords, who could under-declare their income from their lands.<sup>58</sup>

The representatives of the Nadar community from Tirunelveli and Kanyakumari while deplored that “their men are not in high positions in these districts,” also pleaded for more liberal admission of backward class boys and girls by reducing qualifying marks. They also wanted the government to make the procedure to get a license for tapping sweet toddy easier, as the bulk of the community were toddy tappers.<sup>59</sup> The Nadar Mahajana Sangam, Madurai, in a separate representation, claimed that nearly 70 percent of their people were still toddy tappers and presented a charter of demands for the amelioration of their living conditions. These demands included the relaxation of the terms of license for tree climbing, assignment of lands on which the palmyrah trees existed to the actual tappers, provision of housing facilities and facilities for warehousing jaggery and for its marketing. There was a society dealing with the marketing of jaggery, but the representatives of that society did not meet the Commission. When their attention was drawn to the existence of several schools and colleges run by the Nadar community and asked whether this was not an indication of their comparative affluence and progress of education, they maintained that the affluence was confined to a very small section.<sup>60</sup> On this the Commission remarked: As it happens with many backward communities, which have made some progress in recent years, this community has also produced a fairly prosperous upper layer which gets the benefit of educational facilities in admission and appointment facilities in the name of the community. This layer is by no means so small.

The Maravars, a de-notified community, pointed out that the reclamation schemes were not fully and properly implemented in Tirunelveli district and hence the number of boys and girls in schools and colleges was not proportionate to the total population of the community. They were bitter that employment opportunities both in government service as well as outside were denied to them because of their background. The deputation from the Yadava community stressed the fact that the community had made no progress at all in education “and very large numbers are still leading nomadic life, tending sheep and herding them from village to village.” They claimed that their representation in government services was inadequate and very few of their boys and girls secured admissions to institutions of higher learning.

They complained that they had no political pull at the district or state level, and they were a neglected community.<sup>61</sup>

A delegation representing Saiva Pillais met the Commission at Courtallam and pleaded that they should be treated as backward class. However, the Commission noted that “it could not be established that they are educationally, socially and economically backward. They are a very forward and progressive community.”<sup>62</sup> A similar plea was made by the Vania or oil-monger community to include them in the most backward classes list.<sup>63</sup> According to the Commission, “some MLAs and other enlightened witnesses also suggested that in view of the widespread prevalence of poverty, an economic criterion should be applied as an alternative to caste-wise classification.”<sup>64</sup>

The Sattanathan Commission, in its report, had observed that just nine communities out of the numerous communities listed as backward, accounting for only about 11 percent of the total BC population, had cornered most of the benefits available to the entire BC population. These communities cornered 37 percent of the non-gazetted and 48 percent of the gazetted posts; 44 percent of the engineering and 47 percent of the medical college seats; and 34 percent of the scholarships. It was to prevent this kind of monopolization of the benefits, the Commission had recommended an income limit of Rs9,000 per annum (Radhakrishnan 1989).

Advocating strict enforcement of reservation rules in appointments made in Panchayat administration, public sector and even private sector undertakings, the Sattanathan Commission wanted the government to adopt certain criteria to eliminate the advanced section in each caste: a) Whose gross annual income exceeded Rs9,000 in the case of salaried class; if both father and mother were earning, then their total income together was not to exceed Rs12,000; b) In the case of landowners, who owned more than 10 standard acres of land; c) In the case of business people, whose taxable income was above Rs9,000 per annum (The Report of the Backward Classes Commission 1971). The economic measures recommended by the Commission included the distribution of surplus lands to the Most Backward Classes along with the Scheduled Castes and increase of minimum wages to the workers engaged in agriculture and weaving.<sup>65</sup>

Following the recommendations of this Commission, the DMK ministry in 1971 enhanced the BC reservations from 25 percent to 31 percent, against the recommended 33 percent, and the SC and ST reservations to 18 percent against the recommended continuation of the existing 16 percent and the remaining 51 percent for the general category. However, it refused to prescribe any income limit, lest it should incur the displeasure of the BC elite (The Tamil Nadu Second Backward Classes Commission 1985). When M. G. Ramachandran (MGR) came to power as the founder-president of the All-India Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, he dared to issue a GO on July 2, 1979, prescribing the annual income limit of Rs9,000 as recommended by the Sattanathan Commission as eligibility to avail BC reservation. This provoked widespread protests and the DMK, which was the main opposition party then, announced a state-wide agitation. This became an election issue in the Lok Sabha elections held in January 1980 and the All India Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) led by MGR was defeated in the elections. MGR then, not only withdrew the GO, but also with a view to outwitting his opponents, announced an increase in the BC reservations from 31 percent to 50 percent (Radhakrishnan 1989).

Several writ petitions were filed in the Supreme Court against the GO contending that the reservation of 68 percent (50 percent for BCs and 18 percent for SCs and STs) was excessive, that the categorization of BC was made not on the basis of socio-economic and educational backwardness but on caste and political considerations and that the dropping of the income limit was arbitrary. The Supreme Court, while disposing of these writ petitions on October 15, 1982, directed the Tamil Nadu government to appoint a commission within two months to review the existing list of BCs in the state after enumeration and factual and sci-

entific investigation of their conditions. It was in pursuance of this directive that MGR constituted on December 13, 1982, the Second Backward Classes Commission in Tamil Nadu. The Commission, headed by J. A. Ambasankar, a retired Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officer and former Chairman of the Tamil Nadu Service Commission, had 21 members in it. The prominent members of the Commission were the educationist and later Vellore Institute of Technology (VIT) University Chancellor G. Viswanathan, the then Vellore AIADMK MLA V. Swaminathan, P. Nedumaran, Kumari Anandan of the Congress Party, Anbil Dharmalingam, of DMK and Thirumathi Soundra Kailasam, the founder of Gandhigram Rural University, Dindigul (The Tamil Nadu Second Backward Classes Commission 1985). For determining social and educational backwardness, the Commission applied the criteria of social backwardness, occupational backwardness, economic backwardness and educational backwardness. Using six indicators, it tested the criteria set and recommended 174 castes for retention in the BC list, deletion of 34 communities and inclusion of 24 from the list of forward communities. The Commission recommended 32 percent reservation in conformity with the Supreme Court's ruling so that the total reservation did not exceed 50 percent (32 percent for BCs and 18 percent for SCs and STs) (Radhakrishnan 1989).

The Commission noted with grave concern the tardy growth rate of literacy from 20.8 to 46.8 percent during 1951–81. In a survey conducted by the Commission amongst headmasters of schools it was found that the poverty of parents was the decisive factor (85 percent) for the poor enrolment of children in schools. The Commission observed that the children from poor families were malnourished and hence recommended a free noon meal scheme up to college level. In professional colleges, particularly in medical colleges, only 10.4 percent of students of Backward Classes had secured admissions based on merit. The remaining 89.6 percent acquired admission based on reservation (The Tamil Nadu Second Backward Classes Commission 1985). Regrettably, as the Commission recorded, about 144 castes listed as Backward Classes went unrepresented in the medical college selection lists for the three years (1980–1, 1981–2 and 1982–3) that the Commission studied. This meant only 77 castes could access medical education.<sup>66</sup>

The report of the Commission also revealed that of the total BC students admitted to the professional courses, more than three-fourths were from a small number of the BC communities (34 out of 222) accounting for only about two-fifths of the total BC population in the state. Of the total number of BC scholarships, and candidates of all grades selected by the Public Service Commission, about two-thirds again went to this relatively small number of communities among the Backward Classes. Even within this small number, about one-third of the total BC population had cornered as much as two-thirds of the BC admissions to the professional courses, more than half of the scholarships, and the appointments made by the Public Service Commission (Radhakrishnan 1989).

Citing V. R. Krishna Iyer's ruling in a case relating to Kerala state, the Commission recommended compartmental reservations, that is, grouping the BC communities according to the degree of their backwardness and allowing representation out of the reserved quota to the several groups (The Tamil Nadu Second Backward Classes Commission 1985). The Commission observed that only a few caste groups were grabbing the opportunities provided for in the reservation rules and those who had benefited little out of reservation should be specially targeted for improvement. In this context, it recommended separate reservation for the deserving communities that had not benefited from reservation.<sup>67</sup> But as many as 14 members out of 21 of the Commission dissented against these recommendations. Amongst several other things, they questioned the rationale behind the inclusion of 17 forward communities as BC and deletion of 34 communities from the existing BC list. They demanded 67 percent reservations in pro-

portion to the BC population, as against the much reduced 32 percent recommended by the Chairman (Radhakrishnan 1989).

The Vanniyars who were demanding proportional reservation wanted immediate implementation of the Ambasankar Commission Report. They were now organized under a non-party leadership to represent their grievances. Dr Ramadoss, who united 27 local Vanniyar outfits in northern Tamil Nadu and formed the Vanniyar Sangam in 1980, demanded an exclusive 20 percent reservation for Vanniyars in the state and a 2 percent reservation in central services. Vanniyars organized a "rasta roka" for one full week in September 1987. Vanniyakula Kshatriyas, or Vanmniyars as they are generally known, constitute the largest community in Tamil Nadu, *viz.*, South Arcot, North Arcot, Salem, Chengalpattu and Dharmapuri; they also form a sizable section of the population in a few taluks of Thanjavur, Tiruchi and Coimbatore districts. Though not a conglomeration of different castes and subcastes they carry different titles in different districts, *viz.*, Padayachi, in Chengalpattu, South Arcot and Thanjavur, Naicker or Nayagar in North Arcot and Madras and Gounder in Salem, Dharmapuri and Coimbatore districts. Their claim is they form 30 percent of the state's population. But they constitute 11.66 percent of the total state population and should the SC population be excluded, then they constitute 14.35 percent of the population. In the four northern districts they comprise between 19 and 37 percent of the total population and between 23 and 50 percent if the SC population is excluded. This explains the intensity of the Vanniyars' struggle in these districts, especially in South Arcot where they account for about 50 percent of the non-SC population nearly 37 percent of the total population (Vidyasagar 1988). The SC population constituted 26.1 percent and 15.07 percent, respectively, in Chengalpattu, North Arcot, South Arcot and Salem (including Dharmapuri) districts in 1981, while the average for the state was 18.35 percent.

The above figures indicate that the Vanniyar and SC communities are the two numerically important and preponderant ones in northern Tamil Nadu. The growth rate of literacy has been evidently low in South Arcot among the non-SC population, meaning the Vanniyars. In the northern districts (except Chengalpattu) around 60 to 70 percent was illiterate at the close of the 1980s. Though the proportion of literates is much lower amongst the SC population their growth rate has been impressive in all the northern districts. Therefore, the Vanniyars believed they were lagging behind the SCs educationally, especially in the background of the spread of education among the younger generations of SCs; therefore, they demanded greater educational opportunities through reservation.

The new Vanniyar Sangam led by Dr Ramadoss sent innumerable telegrams and letters to the Chief Minister M. G. Ramachandran pleading for a meeting to apprise him of the Vanniyars' problems. When all these were of no avail, it organized a one-week road-block agitation in September 1987. This agitation turned violent resulting in loss of 20 lives in both police firing and clashes between Vanniyars and SCs. Over 20,000 persons were detained (Radhakrishnan 1989). The AIADMK ministry headed by MGR refused to negotiate with the Vanniyars. Yet, their violent agitation forced the state to review the reservation issue. This triggered vociferous claims and counterclaims from practically all other caste organizations. As the situation grew out of control, Presidential rule was imposed on the state and the center deputed its then External Affairs Minister, P. V. Narasimha Rao to sort out the issue. Narasimha Rao held talks with representatives of as many as 42 communities which also demanded proportional reservation (Radhakrishnan 1989).

The Congress (I) Party, in its bid to outwit its political adversaries, advised the Governor of Tamil Nadu to announce compartmental reservation. But there was delay and, in the meantime, the DMK ministry on its assumption of office after the 1989 elections ordered compartmental reservation in February 1989. Out of the overall 50 percent BC reservations for 201 communi-

ties (comprising an estimated 67 percent of the state's population), it reserved 20 percent for 39 communities listed as most backward within the BC list and 68 communities listed as denotified tribes, together accounting for about 36 percent of the BC population. The Vanniyars benefited much by this reservation rule. Another caste group which gained out of this new reservation rule was Mukkulathore (Kallar, Agamudaiar and Maravar). Nadars claimed that they were the losers of this new list of Most Backward Class and demanded that they should be included in the list of Most Backward Classes. But their caste organization is no longer united and strong enough to conduct any sustained movement to press their demand.

### **Separation of certain castes for special treatment**

The Mandal Commission appointed during the Janata Party rule at the center in 1979, while recommending reservation of jobs in central services, had identified 3,743 castes and listed them as Other Backward Classes (OBCs) (Raman 1995). Some of the important recommendations of this Commission were: 20 percent of all services under the central government and its public undertakings should be set apart for the OBCs included in its list which accounted for 52 percent of the population (Radhakrishnan 1989). The Supreme Court, however, ruled that the total quantum of reservation under Articles 15(4) and 16(4) of the constitution should not be more than 50 percent and it fixed the reservation quantum for OBCs at 27 percent, taking into account the existing 22.5 percent for SCs and STs. The Commission also recommended that candidates belonging to OBCs selected on the basis of merit in an open competition should not be adjusted against their reservation quota.

Reservation should be made at the time of promotion as well. Unfilled quotas must be carried forward for three years. The Commission recommended that the private sector should be obliged to emulate the government and public sector in this respect (Raman 1995). For the general economic and occupational development of the OBCs, the Commission made a number of other recommendations. These include starting co-operative societies of occupational groups and separate networks of financial and technical institutions to foster their business and industrial enterprises; the introduction of progressive land reforms and the allotment of surplus lands to OBCs. The Commission wanted separate institutions to be started for providing financial and technical assistance to artisans and craftsmen for reviving traditional occupations which may have been lost on account of industrialization and modernization. But the recommendations, though taken up for discussion in 1982 and 1983, were put in cold storage.

Prime Minister V. P. Singh, in order to strengthen his political base, decided to implement the recommendations of Mandal Commission and accordingly issued the orders in 1991. This evoked violent protests in northern Indian states and the Supreme Court stayed the operation of the orders. In its later judgment on the *Indira Sawhney vs Union of India* case—known popularly as Mandal Commission Case—the reservation rule followed in Tamil Nadu was questioned by the Supreme Court. It ruled that the total reservations under Article 16(4) should not exceed 50 percent. In the meantime, J. Jayalalitha had become the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu. As a part of an effort to outwit her political rival Karunanidhi, she decided to challenge the verdict aggressively.

On November 9, 1993, the Tamil Nadu Assembly at her initiative unanimously resolved to call upon the central government to take steps immediately to bring a suitable amendment to the Constitution of India so that the Government of Tamil Nadu could continue its policy of 69 percent reservation in government services and for admission in educational institutions. An all-party meeting held on November 26, 1993, urged the central government to ensure the continued implementation of 69 percent reservation by initiating immediate steps. The

Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly enacted legislation entitled “Tamil Nadu Backward Classes, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Reservation of Seats in Educational Institution and of appointments or posts in the Services under the State)” and forwarded it to the President of India for his assent. In view of the explosive nature of the matter, the Union Home Minister held meetings with the leaders of political parties on July 13, 1994, in which the general consensus was that the Bill should be assented to. Accordingly, the President gave his assent to the Bill on July 19, 1994, and the Tamil Nadu Government notified it as Act No. 45 of 1994 to provide 69 percent reservation (30 percent for Backward Classes, 20 percent for Most Backward Castes, 18 percent for Scheduled Castes and 1 percent for Scheduled Tribes). Therefore, when there was an anti-reservation protest in 2006 in northern India, Tamil Nadu stayed calm.<sup>68</sup>

The validity of the Tamil Nadu Government’s Act No. 45 of 1994 was, however, challenged in the apex court of the country by one S. P. Sampath Kumar who had also prayed for stay on the implementation of the Tamil Nadu Act. The Supreme Court did not stay the operation of the Act. Since some other writ petitions were also filed before the Supreme Court questioning the sustainability of the Tamil Nadu Act, all of them were first referred to the Constitution Bench and later to a Special Bench. The Three-Judges Bench of the Supreme Court comprising Hon. The Chief Justice, Hon. Mr Justice K. S. Panicker Radhakrishnan and Hon. Mr Justice Swatanter Kumar in an interim order gave the direction to the State of Tamil Nadu to collect and place the quantifiable data before the Tamil Nadu State Backward Classes Commission, which on the basis of it was to decide the quantum of reservation.

It was in this backdrop the DMK government reconstituted the Tamil Nadu Backward Classes Commission in July 2006. M. S. Janardhanan, a retired High Court judge, headed this Commission which was asked to examine and recommend inclusion of communities in the lists of Backward Classes/Most Backward Classes, keeping in view the provisions in Article 16(4) of the Constitution of India and various decisions of the Supreme Court on the subject. The Commission was also asked to make recommendations on improved reservation for Christians, Muslims and other minorities based on their social and educational backwardness. Based on the recommendation of this Commission, 3.5 percent special reservation for Muslims within the Backward Caste quota was provided for in the Act of 2007 of Tamil Nadu Government in response to Muslim political outfits demand to the Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi. A similar demand was made for the Arunthathiyan community by the Communist Party of India (Marxist). This demand also was referred to Janardhanan Commission, which recommended in favor of 3.5 percent reservation for the Arunthathiyan and other related subgroups like the Madharis and Chakkiliyars within 18 percent quota meant for Scheduled Castes.<sup>69</sup> Though Jayalalitha called it a political fraud in the beginning, later she started supporting it. Dr S. Krishnaswamy’s Puthiya Tamilagam, an outfit for Pallars, went to court against this decision. Although the Viduthalai Chiruthaihal Party chief Tirumavalavan supported the government’s move, the party ideologue D. Ravikumar demanded increase of reservation for SCs from 18 percent to 19 percent.<sup>70</sup>

Submitting its final report under the caption “Justification of Reservation under the Tamil Nadu Act of 45 of 1994” on July 8, 2011, the Commission headed by Justice M. S. Janarthanan refuted the arguments advanced in favor of application of the creamy layer in the state by furnishing data, both qualitative and quantitative. The Commission concluded that

the stage for application of creamy layer in the State of Tamil Nadu, providing reservation for MBC/DNC and BCs in matters of admission into educational institutions and recruitments in the services under the State. Elaborating on this the Commission further said, the Tamil Nadu Act 45 of 1994 has been in existence for 17 years since 1994. The quota intended for Backward Classes and Most Backward Classes/De-notified

Communities at 30 percent and 20 percent respectively has not at all been availed by them to the fullest extent, i.e., to say, they have availed of such reservation not exceeding the reserved quota intended for each of them, in the sense of not crossing the “*Lakshman Rekha*.<sup>71</sup>

So the Commission categorically stated that exclusion of the creamy layer for obtaining the benefit of reservation was not warranted.

### **Summary and conclusion**

The colonial state’s dubious claim of fairness and neutrality to all irrespective of one’s religious faith or caste affinity stood exposed whenever a problem ruffled upper-caste sentiments. The early English administrators avoided appointing Christian converts, mostly from lower strata of society, in key positions. Until Macaulay prepared his famous minute for education in India, there was no concern for providing education to the people of the country they ruled. Notwithstanding their “civilizing mission” and the Queen’s proclamation (1858), there was no serious effort on the part of the colonial administrators. Only in 1871, was concern about the poor state of education among the Muslims expressed. In 1880, the Director of Public Instructions, Madras, admitted in his annual report, that the educational system they had designed had not reached the lowest classes of the population. This means until the last decade of the 19th century, a large chunk of non-Brahmin castes could not access education, while a few upper castes like Mudaliyars, Vellalars, Chettiyars, Nairs, Reddys and Naidus availed the Western education; but this was not proportionate to their strength, and they lagged far behind Brahmins in the Presidency.

The Government, in 1881, ordered the compilation of statistics regarding the caste-wise representation in state services. In appointments with a monthly salary of above Rs10, the Brahmins who formed 3.5 percent of the population held 42.2 percent of the appointments, while the non-Brahmins who constituted 87.9 percent of population were in 36.5 percent of the posts. The number of non-Brahmins in appointments with a monthly salary of less than Rs10 was a little higher. The 1882 Education Commission’s recommendations—that no one should be refused admission to a government college or school on the grounds of caste and that special schools or classes for children of low castes should be set up in places where a sufficient number of them were found or where the state-funded schools did not provide adequately for their education—were not implemented earnestly.

When the grant-in-aid code was prepared in 1885, the Director of Public Instruction prepared a list to provide reduced rates of fees for pupils belonging to backward poor classes. Most of the petitions for inclusion in the backward classes list to avail educational concessions, especially after the introduction of half-fee concession in 1892, also carried a plea for reservation in government service. As a part of process of indigenization, the Royal Commission on Public Services was set up in 1912. When the Commission visited Madras in 1913, it was informed of the preponderance of Brahmins in departments of revenue, registration and judiciary, especially in recruitments made through competitive examinations. The list of Backward Classes, drawn up in 1885, came up for revision in 1906. The list was further expanded in 1913. The decennial lists of backward classes from 1883 right up to 1988, increased from just 11 names in 1883 to 39 in 1893 to 323 in 1988.

Missionary activities and their proselytizing efforts modernized certain castes, principally Nadars. Their conversion to Christianity and thereby access to education enhanced their economic status and prompted them to assert their social rights. Though Nadars and Vanmiyars were

awakened of their rights around the same time, the Vanniyars did not take to education in a big way like the Nadars. Moreover in the Vanniyar group, only the educated were articulating their aspirations and they failed to inspire their ranks as the Nadars did. Similarly, unlike Vanniyars, Nadars did not try to transform their caste association into a political party. They also did not give much importance to the reservation issue, at least in the beginning. They decided to make an independent living to gain public esteem and so many of them moved out of their native soil to set up small shops and business firms in towns and cities. Their model of abandoning traditional occupations, i.e., toddy tapping, is worth emulating for any social group which is aspiring to upward mobility.

The churn in society and the assertion by the deprived and marginalized people were in no small manner due to the deep-rooted antipathy for Brahminism of Periyar E.V. R. and his Self-Respect Movement. This provided the base for the launch of powerful militant social protest movements later by the deprived and marginalized groups. The hard-won reservation benefits were threatened twice, first when in the post-independence period, in the absence of clarity in the constitutional provision and the resultant nullification of the reservation rule in force by the judiciary; and second time, when MGR attempted to enforce income limit for availing concession under reservation rules. On both occasions, the state government acted only in response to the groundswell of anger from the affected people.

The first two Backward Class Commissions advocated elimination of the creamy layer, but the third Backward Class Commission under Justice Janarthanam in its Report of 2011 has closed the scope of discussion on the creamy layer question, saying that the stage for exclusion of the creamy layer has not yet been reached. But the way forward for the progress of many more communities through the benefit of reservation is to remain open-minded on the creamy layer issue.

### Notes

- 1 *Indian Review* (Reprint) October, 1911, 155. Elphinstone's successor Sir George Clark was still worse. As late as 1911 he plainly admitted that the British rule cannot remove or abolish the social disabilities in the face of notions of physical repugnance and personal contamination arising from association with Depressed Classes, which were inherited dislikes or antagonisms. *Ibid*, 156.
- 2 *Public Despatches from England to Fort William*, No 8, February 2, 1831; cited in Radhakrishnan, P., "Communal Representation in Tamil Nadu, 1850–1916," 1585.
- 3 Radhakrishnan, P., Communal Representation in Tamil Nadu, 1585.
- 4 *Public Consultations*, Vol. 618, January 24, 1834.
- 5 *Proceedings of Board of Revenue*, April 21, 1845, and April 23, 1846.
- 6 Radhakrishnan, P., Communal Representation in Tamil Nadu, 1591. A Muslim obtained the BA degree for the first time in the history of Madras University in 1871 (*Madras Presidency Administrative Report*, 1871–72)
- 7 Radhakrishnan, P., Communal Representation in Tamil Nadu, 1590.
- 8 Radhakrishnan, P., Backward Classes in Tamil Nadu, 1872–1988, 2–4.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 4.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 288.
- 11 Saraswati, S., Minorities in Madras State, 305.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 306.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 296–7.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 1587.
- 15 *Proceedings of Board of Revenue*, 1886, quoted in Radhakrishnan, P., Communal Representation in Tamil Nadu, 1587.
- 16 *GO no. 122, Revenue Department*, 1886, cited in Radhakrishnan, P., Communal Representation in Tamil Nadu, 1587.
- 17 The percentage of Brahmins in total population given in different sources varies from 3 to 3.7 percent. In this essay 3.5 is stated irrespective of the percentage found in source.

- 18 Saraswati, S., Minorities in Madras State, 302–3.
- 19 Radhakrishnan, P., Backward Classes in Tamil Nadu, 5–6.
- 20 GO no.544, *Education Department*, 1903; Cited in Radhakrishnan, P., Communal Representation in Tamil Nadu, 588.
- 21 GO nos. 386 & 387, *Education Department*, 1887, quoted in Saraswati, op.cit., 304.
- 22 Radhakrishnan, P., Backward Classes in Tamil Nadu, 8–9.
- 23 Ibid., 9–10.
- 24 Ibid., 19–20.
- 25 Ibid., 24.
- 26 Radhakrishnan, P., Backward Classes in Tamil Nadu, 14–15.
- 27 Radhakrishnan, P., Communal Representation in Tamil Nadu, 1596.
- 28 Radhakrishnan, P., Backward Classes in Tamil Nadu, 19–20.
- 29 Radhakrishnan, P., Backward Classes in Tamil Nadu, 21–3
- 30 GO no. 23357 *Revenue Department*, 1910. Quoted in Radhakrishnan, P., Communal Representation in Tamil Nadu, 1589.
- 31 Beteille, A., Caste and Political Group Formation in Tamilnad, 309
- 32 Ibid., 309.
- 33 Ibid., 310.
- 34 GO no. 202 *Public Department*, 1913. Quoted in Radhakrishnan, P., Communal Representation in Tamil Nadu, 1590.
- 35 Radhakrishnan, P., Communal Representation in Tamil Nadu, 1595.
- 36 Beteille, A., Caste and Political Group Formation in Tamilnad, 269.
- 37 *Report of the Backward Classes Commission, Tamil Nadu*, 1971, 15.
- 38 Radhakrishnan, P., Backward Classes in Tamil Nadu, 36.
- 39 Ibid., 7
- 40 From 11 in 1883, the number increased to 39 in 1893 to 46 in 1903 to 122 in 1913 to 131 in 1923 to 182 in 1933 to 238 in 1943 to 270 in 1953 to 302 to 1963 to 323 in 1988. Radhakrishnan, P., Backward Classes in Tamil Nadu, 26.
- 41 Ibid., 147.
- 42 GO Ms. No. 353, Department of Industries, Labour and Cooperation, dated January 31, 1957. I remember to have written in the caste column “haman” to claim fee concession and scholarship for my school education in the late 1950s. Otherwise my parents thought shanans were inferior to nadars. There was no inter-caste marriage practiced between these two subsects.
- 43 Ibid., 239
- 44 Vidyasagar, R.,Vanniyars’Agitation, 509.
- 45 Ibid., 510
- 46 GO nos. 970–71, *Public Department*, 1897; cited in Radhakrishnan, P., Communal Representation in Tamil Nadu, 1595.
- 47 GO no. 112, *Education Department*, 1903; G.O. nos. 970–71, *Public Department*, July 20, 1897; cited in Radhakrishnan, P., Communal Representation in Tamil Nadu, 1595.
- 48 Ibid., 281–2. Yadavas in Tamil Nadu are known by the name Konar or Idayar.
- 49 Ibid., 277–8.
- 50 GO no. 952, *Home (Miscellaneous) Department*, 1920.
- 51 Memorandum of the Madras Government: On the Working of the Reformed Government- Submitted to the Indian Statutory Commission, 1930, 620.
- 52 Rao, M.S.A., 1979. *Social Movements and Social Transformation:A Study of Two Backward Classes Movements in India*. Madras: The Macmillan Company of India Ltd., 215. The ideology developed by E. V. R. Periyar idealized Ravana as a Dravidian hero against Rama and denounced Sanskrit as it was associated with Aryan invaders and Brahminical Hinduism. The Dravidian ideology which became the basis of Self Respect Movement was anti-Brahminical, anti-Aryan, anti-Sanskrit and anti-north Indian.
- 53 GO no. 3437, *Public Department*, 1947. Cited in Radhakrishnan, P., Backward Class Movement in Tamil Nadu, 121.
- 54 GO no. 231, *Public [Confidential] Department*, 1951. Cited in. Radhakrishnan, P., Backward Class Movement in Tami Nadu, 121–3.
- 55 Ibid., 7.
- 56 Ibid., 7 and 30.
- 57 Ibid., 50–1.

- 58 Ibid., 31–2.
- 59 Ibid., 132
- 60 Ibid., 137.
- 61 Ibid., 132–3.
- 62 Ibid., 134.
- 63 Ibid., 135
- 64 Ibid., 135–6.
- 65 Ibid., 267 and 269.
- 66 Ibid., 139.
- 67 Ibid., 378–9.
- 68 *Times of India*, July 22, 1994. Senior lawyer K. M. Vijayan came under a murderous attack, a day before his petition against the Tamil Nadu government's 69 percent reservation policy was to come up in the Supreme Court. An armed gang assaulted Vijayan at his Kodambakkam home on July 21, 1994, when he was about to leave for New Delhi to argue his case. The attack led to a prolonged estrangement between the Advocates' Association and the AIADMK government. Yet the accused in the assault case were later acquitted of the charges.
- 69 *Times of India*, July 28, 2010; *Indian Express*, July 16, 2013.
- 70 Viswanathan, S., 2009. *Frontline*, 26 (1).
- 71 *Asian Tribune*, 12 (695).

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# 14

## BACKWARD CLASS MOVEMENT IN KARNATAKA

*M. Gurulingaiah*

### Introduction

The Backward Classes constitute an important segment of India's population. They are a large and mixed category of people with boundaries that are both unclear and elastic. The significance of the category Backward Classes lies not only in its size and extent, but also in the uniquely Indian way of defining its boundaries. The category of Backward Classes is made up of three principal components: the Scheduled Castes (SCs), the Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Other Backward Classes (OBCs). While the SCs and the STs are well-defined categories, the OBCs are a residual category; the position of individual castes in this category is highly ambiguous and it is difficult to give a definitive of the number of the castes and each of their socio-economic status.

In Karnataka, the OBC communities like in the rest of the country suffer from educational and social disabilities. Despite 70-plus years after independence, their socio-economic conditions have not improved. Although there were several social movements launched by different communities of the OBCs, they did not result in any major transformation. According to the late D. Devaraj Urs, former Chief Minister of Karnataka, the socio-economic conditions of OBCs in the state were worse than that of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. While most non-dominant OBCs could not organize themselves and fight against inequalities, discrimination, deprivation and exploitation, it became possible with the establishment of caste identities through various struggles and efforts.

### Definition and concept of Other Backward Classes

The origin of the term "Backward Classes" can be traced to the latter part of the 19th century. For a long time, the terms "Depressed Classes" and "Backward Classes" were used interchangeably. At times, "Depressed Classes" included only untouchables while at other times the term included the so-called criminal nomadic tribes, aboriginal tribes and the untouchables. Other words to denote the backward groups that were in use included "exterior castes" and "excluded classes." According to Sir Henry Sharp, the then Educational Commissioner of the Government of India, the Backward Classes included those pursuing unclean professions, or those belonging to "unclean" castes, those who were illiterate and poor and also some classes of Muslims.

The “Other Backward Classes” for whom preferential treatment is authorized are not defined in the Constitution. It is said that a backward class is class or community which is backward in the opinion of the government. The problem of specifying backward classes poses a great difficulty. Generally, we can say socially and educationally backward people fall within the category of the backward classes, but so far it has not been possible to list all those belonging to these classes and evolve acceptable criteria for identifying them.

The term OBC was widely used by the British administration but had come to mean “Other Backward Castes” in administrative usage. It is used in the Constitution of India to designate Backward Classes other than the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Article 15(4) refers to them as “socially and educationally backward citizens” and Article 340 terms them as “socially and educationally backward classes.” Article 16(4) mentions “backward class of citizens.” And Article 46 refers to the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of the people.

In view of the precedents under the Government of India Act, 1935, the identification of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes has been relatively easy. By and large the Scheduled Castes are the former untouchable castes. The identification of OBCs however, bristles with problems. During British rule, a number of non-untouchable castes were identified as Backward Classes in different provinces and states under government orders at different times. But after independence the state governments, mainly in southern and western India, have been constrained to identify OBCs through specially appointed commissions. At the all-India level, however, they have to be identified by a commission appointed by the president under Article 340. The Mandal Commission was the second such commission to be appointed after the Kaka Kalelkar Commission.

The British administrative usage of the term OBC in the sense of Other Backward Castes has not only persisted, but the law courts have also from time to time justified it. The judiciary’s role *vis-à-vis* caste has therefore greatly increased. Obviously, this raises the question of not only the judicial notion of caste but also that of how the judiciary handles the social reality of the caste system while adjudicating on the question of OBCs.

Backward classes first acquired a technical meaning in the princely state of Mysore when in 1918 the Mysore government appointed a committee to find out the means of encouraging members of the Backward Communities to join the public services. In the southern provinces the term Depressed or Backward Classes included all castes and communities except Brahmins. The Hartog Committee on education, which submitted its report in 1929, defined the term backward classes as castes or classes which are educationally backward.

In 1930, the state committee examined the question of the nomenclature of backward classes and insisted that the term Depressed Classes should include only untouchables and that other larger communities may be designated as Backward Classes. The Constitution of India has not defined the backward class. It has been left to the state Governments to spell out the term. A backward class is a class or community which is backward in the opinion of the government. But it has been judicially conceded that backward classes of citizens are those who are socially, economically and educationally weak; these factors are the reasons for the various communities lagging much behind the standards of educationally advanced people. Any committee and commission of the state and central government can identify and determine the backward classes by using some indicators.

Judicial pronouncements on the subject reflect the ambiguity inherent in the situation. There are judgments as in the famous Balaji case, which imply that there is, or ought to be, a clear distinction between caste and class. There are other judgments which maintain, as Rajendran case, that a caste has always been recognized as a class. The discrepancy between two views is in part, but only in part, due to the use in the first case of a sociological conception of class, and

in the second, of what may be called a logical or purely formal conception of it. But ambiguity is not merely terminological; its roots lie deeper, in our traditional social structure, and in our contemporary attitudes to it.

Justice K. Subba Rao, former Chief Justice of India, defined backward classes as “an ascertainable and identifiable group of persons based on caste, religion, race, language, occupation and such others, with definite characteristics of backwardness in various aspects of human existence—social, cultural, economic, political and such others.”

We can generally define backward classes as those social groups or classes or castes which are characterized by illiteracy and lack of education, poverty, exploitation of labor, non-representation in services and touchability. In simple words, the term Backward Classes can be defined as a social category which consists of all the socially, educationally, economically and politically Backward Groups, Castes and Tribes.

### **Social profile of OBCs in Karnataka**

In Karnataka, OBCs consist of 200 communities, castes and tribes. All these castes have been identified as pursuing traditional occupations, which are considered to be inferior, degrading, involving manual labor, are unremunerative, seasonal and stigmatized. These occupations do not come under the organized sector of economic activity. Every Backward Class Commission has found that these castes have low literacy rate, live in poverty and are inadequately represented in state services. No private sector industry has opened its doors to these people to provide them an alternative source of employment to their traditional caste occupation. A majority of people in these castes are either unemployed or under-employed.

In Karnataka, at present 89 castes are listed as Most Backward Castes and placed in Category I. The Havanur Commission (first OBC commission) treated them as Backward Tribes. These castes are Golla (Yadava), Besta, Mogaveera, Budabuduki, Dombidasa, Gisadi, Jogi, Khatic, Kudubi, Kunabi, Sikkaligara, Uppara, and Gowli. Gollas and Gowli are pastoral communities which engage in cattle and sheep rearing as their traditional occupation. Besta and Mogaveera communities are fisher communities engaging in fishing. The Khatic community is one of the most backward, stigmatized communities whose occupation is animal slaughter and selling meat. Dombidasa, Gisadi, Budabuduki and a few other communities are nomadic and semi-nomadic communities which are still leading a nomadic life.

Category IIA of the list consists of 101 castes. Each one of these castes has its own traditional occupation. The important Backward Caste communities comprise Madivala, Ediga, Kumbara, Tigala and Ganiga. The traditional occupation of Madivala is washing clothes. Idiga and allied castes are toddy tappers. The opening of distilleries and the dwindling number of palm trees has vitally affected the source of livelihood of these castes. The traditional occupation of the Kumbara caste is pot making. After the large-scale production of utensils by the plastic and aluminum industries there is no market for pots made by Kumbaras. Further, potters are also unable to secure raw material in the same way in which they used to get it earlier. This is one caste which has suffered most by the total elimination of market for pots. They have not been able to secure an alternative source of livelihood.

Sheep rearing is the traditional occupation of Kurubas and Gollas. Their occupation is seriously affected because of depletion of forest and grazing lands. Barbers really had no competitors from any other caste. The occupation is degrading and unremunerative and they are subjected to the practice of untouchability they carried on this occupation until recently. However, in the recent times the opening of high-tech saloons and beauty parlors has started to make inroads into the occupation of these people, displacing them to an extent, with people of other castes

getting trained and being employed in these saloons and parlors. Tigalas have traditionally grown vegetables which are now endangered by the import of vegetables from neighboring states and the expansion of modern storage facilities for vegetables and fruits.

Handicrafts and carpentry are the traditional occupation of Vishwakarma and Gudigaras. Though economic liberalization has not directly affected them, they are now unable to carry on their traditional occupation because of the non-availability of wood and other raw materials.

The blacksmiths among them are seriously affected by the manufacture of agricultural implements by the big industrial houses like Tata. Hoovadigas are traditional florists in Karnataka. Economic reforms have brought in high-tech floriculture in a big way cutting at the root of the livelihood of this and the other allied castes. The traditional occupation of *Darzis* is tailoring. The traditional occupation of Devanga, Neyge, Kuruhin Shetty and Padmeshale is weaving. Economic reforms have brought in several multinational companies into this occupation. The large-scale import of silk and the opening of a pulp industry has seriously affected these traditional occupations. The weaving industry is the second-largest employment-generating industry in Karnataka. It has been the source of livelihood of about 500,000 families. The change brought about by the economic reforms has seriously affected their livelihood, particularly of those in Khadi and the handloom industry.

### **Non-Brahmin movement in Karnataka**

The origin of the backward classes movement in Karnataka can be traced back to the beginning of the non-Brahmin movement which took place during 1918, which also marked the decline of Brahmin power in the erstwhile princely state of Mysore with the resignation of Sir M. Visvesvaraya from the Diwanship. In the same year, a deputation of non-Brahmin leaders met the Maharaja to protest against the discrimination practiced against their communities. His Highness appointed a committee headed by Sir Leslie Miller to go into the problems of the non-Brahmins. The report was presented for discussion in the Representative Assembly in 1919. The government passed an order on the recommendation of the Miller Committee Report for equitable communal representation in the public services. This had the effect of further encouraging the non-Brahmin movement in Karnataka.

The non-Brahmin movement in Karnataka was initiated by the Vokkaligas and Lingayats, the two dominant castes of Karnataka. An interesting development that followed the emergence of these dominant categories was the starting of caste associations for effective mobilization. Thus, the Lingayats established the Mysore Lingayat Education Fund Association in 1905, and, in 1906, the Vokkaligas formed the Vokkaligara Sangha. The non-Brahmin connection provided them with a common platform and held these groups together as long as there was Brahmin dominance.

The non-Brahmin movement finally merged with the Congress movement in the state in 1938. During the 1930s and 1940s, the non-Brahmin groups began to lose their cohesion and each caste category began to demand separate representation for itself both in the Representative Assembly and in the government service. The non-Brahmin movement took the shape of a Backward Classes movement from the 1940s onwards. The two dominant castes, namely the Vokkaligas and the Lingayats, began to fight between themselves for a share of political power in the newly emerging representative political system. The new Constitution of India came into force in 1950, following India's independence in 1947. Besides the statutory safeguards, the Constitution also provided the Backward Classes with certain benefits such as reservation of seats in the fields of education, employment and politics, and in welfare schemes. Both the Vokkaligas and the Lingayats enjoyed constitutional benefits in their "backwardness."

These benefits have, in turn, facilitated reforms in their traditions and practices and enabled them to gain a better status in society.

### **Backward Classes committees**

#### ***Miller Committee***

In 1918, the government of the Maharaja of Mysore observed that there was a preponderance of Brahmins in the public service and that steps should be taken to ensure that all other communities are represented in the service of the state. For this purpose, the government appointed a committee in August 1918 under the Chairmanship of Sir Leslie C. Miller to investigate and report on the problem. The questions referred to the committee were the following:

- 1) Changes needed in the then existing rules of recruitment to the public service.
- 2) Special facilities to encourage higher and professional education among the members of backward classes.
- 3) Any other special measures which may be taken to increase the representation of backward communities in the public service without materially affecting the efficiency, due regard being paid also to the general good accruing to the state by a wider diffusion of education and feeling of increased status which will thereby be produced in the backward communities.

The committee submitted its report in July 1919 and after examining this report in consultation with the heads of departments, the government of Mysore passed the order in Government Order (GO) No. 1827-80EAG 308 dated May 16, 1921. The opinion of the government then was that the term “backward communities” should be understood to include all communities in the state other than Brahmins. This position continued more or less until the states reorganization took place in November 1956.

In order to provide uniformity of backward communities across the newly constituted state of Mysore, a committee of officers was appointed in 1959. On the recommendations of this committee, the government issued a uniform list of backward classes in the entire state in May 1959. However, this list was questioned in writ petitions 567, 572, 574 and 575 of 1959 in the High Court of Mysore. The Court held that the government orders listing the backward classes in the state and grouping them for purposes of reservation of seats in technical institutions were not in accordance with Article 15(4) of the Constitution.

#### ***Dr R. Nagana Gowda Committee***

Consequent to this decision of the High Court of Mysore the government appointed another committee to advise them on the question. Accordingly, in accordance with the GO No. P&D 64 OBC 58, dated January 8, 1960, a committee under the Chairmanship of Dr R. Nagana Gowda was constituted. Dr Gowda was a member of the legislative assembly of the erstwhile Mysore state.

The terms of reference were:

1. To suggest the criteria to be adopted in determining which sections of the people in the state should be treated as socially and educationally backward.

2. To suggest the exact manner in which the criteria thus indicated should be followed to enable the state government to determine the persons who should secure such preference, as may be determined by government in respect of admission to technical institutions and appointments to government service.

The committee heard representations from various organizations, associations and individuals in Bangalore. It also toured all over the state and heard representations from individuals of all shades of opinion, and institutions. The first question that was faced by the committee was how the backward classes in the state should be listed and using what criteria.

After carefully considering the various suggestions, the committee came to the conclusion that the following criteria should be adopted for classifying backward classes:

1. Social backwardness of a community should be judged by the state according to the community in society in general (apart from individuals).
2. Its general educational backwardness should be judged on the basis of some fixed standard of education.
3. The representation of the community in government service should also be taken into account to fix the backwardness of the community.

The committee recommended that all socially and educationally backward communities should be considered “Other Backward Classes” in the state for the purpose of reservation of seats in technical institutions under Article 15(4) of the Constitution. The committee was aware that among the backward communities, some were more backward than others and if all the backward communities are grouped together, the interests of the more backward communities among them will be adversely affected. The committee after taking legal opinion came to the conclusion that the list of “Other Backward Classes” should be divided into two parts, with Part A comprising backward communities, and Part B, more-backward communities, and that reservation should be made for these two groups separately with the provision that the more-backward communities should also be eligible for the benefits of backward communities.

The committee decided that such of the socially backward communities whose standard of education is less than 50 percent of the state average should be grouped under “more-backward classes” and those whose standard of education is above this limit and up to the state average should be grouped under “backward classes.” Accordingly, the list of socially and educationally backward classes has been divided into two parts: A and B for the purpose of Article 15(4) of the Constitution.

The GO, 1961, based on the recommendations of the Nagana Gowda Committee was struck down by the Supreme Court in the Balaji case, with an observation that the state government had committed fraud on the power vested in it by Article 15(4). Purporting to go by the decision in the Balaji case, the government issued, in July 1963, an order as a temporary measure, classifying individuals as backward, and within about a week of its issue its validity was challenged by L. G. Havanur in the Mysore High Court in the Vishwanatha case. In its judgment of September 30, 1963, the High Court observed that caste was a relevant, important factor in the determination of backward classes and the classifying of individuals as backward was an imperfect classification which has harmed the Hindu backward castes. The Court asked the state government to make a proper classification at the earliest lest its bonafides were questioned.

During the 1970s, D. Devaraj Urs became the Chief Minister of Karnataka who committed himself to the upliftment of the OBCs in the state. At a conference of De-notified Tribes held at Hubli on May 16, 1971, that he inaugurated, several influential leaders pleaded for the appoint-

ment of a commission to study the problems of the BCs. A resolution to this effect was passed on April 1, 1972, by the Backward Class Cell of the Karnataka Pradesh Congress Committee. The Advocate-General, R. N. Byra Reddy, also supported the demand, following which the government appointed a cabinet subcommittee to examine the question of the appointment of a commission. All three cabinet ministers unanimously stressed the need for a commission. A resolution was also moved in the Legislative Council to this effect. In July 1972, Chief Minister Devaraj Urs announced in the Assembly that a commission would be appointed.

### **First Backward Classes Commission in Karnataka**

The first Backward Classes Commission was accordingly appointed under the chairmanship of L. G. Havanur. The government asked the commission to submit its final report by December 31, 1973, and the deadline was subsequently extended to December 31, 1975. This was the first elaborate and most detailed report on the backward classes in Karnataka. The Havanur Commission report became a model for the other states.

The committee classified the backward classes into three categories: Backward Communities, Backward Castes and Backward Tribes. The commission added seven more communities to the Nomadic and Semi-nomadic Tribes List and named them as “Backward Tribes.” The Havanur Commission submitted its report to the state government in December 1975, and the government accepted its recommendations.

In 1979, the Veerasaiva Mahasabha questioned the findings of the Havanur Commission in the Supreme Court. The state government, during the hearing, told the Supreme Court that it would appoint another commission to take a fresh look at the issue.

### **Second Backward Classes Commission in Karnataka**

In accordance with the direction of the Supreme Court, the Government of Karnataka issued Order No. SWL 7 BCA 80, Bangalore dated April 18, 1983, and thus the second Backward Classes Commission under the Chairmanship of T. Venkataswamy, Retired Secretary of the Karnataka Legislature was constituted. The commission submitted its report on March 31, 1986. On a careful consideration of the guidelines given by the Supreme Court and all other available information with regard to the social and educational backwardness of the communities, castes and tribes, the committee categorized them into five groups: (1) Group A; (2) Group B; (3) Group C; (4) Group D; (5) Group E.

Since the Venkataswamy Commission report eliminated 13 castes, including the two dominant communities, the Lingayat and Vokkaligas, from the list of Socially and Economically Backward Classes (SEBCs), the two communities resorted to agitation as a result of which the State Government was forced to reject the report and issue a fresh GO in October 1986 on reservation for a temporary period until the next commission was appointed and submitted its report.

### **Third Backward Classes Commission in Karnataka**

After the Venkataswamy Commission Report was rejected, the Janata Party government, headed by Ramakrishna Hegde appointed the third Backward Classes Commission on March 9, 1988, under the Chairmanship of retired Supreme Court Judge O. Chinnappa Reddy (a one-man commission) to identify the socially and educationally Backward Classes and provide reservation for them. The commission classified various castes/communities into three categories: Category

*Table 14.1 Reservation Has Been Accorded to the OBCs of Karnataka under Article 15(4) and Article 16(4) of the Constitution for Education and Appointments*

<i>Backward classes</i>	<i>For education</i>	<i>Appointments</i>
Category I	4 percent	4 percent
Category II A	15 percent	15 percent
Category II B	4 percent	4 percent
Category III A	4 percent	4 percent
Category III B	5 percent	5 percent
SC	15 percent	15 percent
ST	3 percent	3 percent
<b>Total</b>	<b>50 percent</b>	<b>50 percent</b>

I, consisting of 52 castes, Category II consisting of 14 castes and Category III consisting of all other comparable SEBCs including Vokkaligas and Lingayats. The commission submitted its report to the government. Mr Veerappa Moily, Chief Minister of Karnataka, accepted the report on April 20, 1994. However, various communities belonging to backward castes strongly opposed and agitated against the report. The agitators were of the opinion that the government's decision came as a surprise and had even affected the admission of children from backward classes to schools. They also said it deprived them of benefits available under the back class category.

As a result of the agitation, the Government of Karnataka issued Order No.150BCA 94, dated September 17, 1994, placing the other most backward classes in Category I as in the previous GO with all the benefits. A total of 50 percent reservation has been accorded to the OBCs of Karnataka in accordance with the above GO under Article 15(4) and Article 16(4) of the Constitution for education and appointments. The category-wise break up is as follows (see Table 14.1):

Now most Backward Castes are placed in Category I, and they benefit from reservation in educational institutions especially professional and technical institutions and appointments in the government without income restriction as in the case of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

### **Prof. Ravivarma Kumar Commission**

Another important commission was constituted under the chairmanship of Prof Ravivarma Kumar in 1997. Prof Ravivarma Kumar also studied scientifically all castes and communities which are backward. The commission recommended that there should be no reservation in promotions, as had been recommended by previous Backward Classes Commissions. However, the report recommended that there may be a reservation of up to 50 percent in direct recruitment at all levels in all posts and cadres in the government service. It also recommended dissociation from reservation given to non-Hindu classes and suggested that those may be provided under Article 14 without affecting the reservation of OBCs, SCs and STs. An interesting recommendation the commission made is that 32 percent reservation should be implemented the Backward Classes in the allotment of industrial licenses and this should be mentioned in all ten-

der notifications issued by the Public Works Department. The commission submitted the report to the Government of Karnataka in 2000 but it has not been implemented so far.

### **Dr C. S. Dwarkanath Commission**

The Government of Karnataka appointed on July 10, 2007, another Backward Classes Commission under the Chairmanship of Dr C. S. Dwarkanath a writer and activist who belonged to the backward Balija Community. Dr Dwarkanath visited every settlement of the Backward Class people in Karnataka. He studied the nomadic and the semi-nomadic communities and made meaningful recommendations, but so far the Government of Karnataka has not taken any action on the report.

### **Conclusion**

As we look back, the OBCs have been struggling for equality and justice for more than seven decades since independence. The struggle helped in bringing about some changes among the OBCs in various spheres of life, mainly due to increased access to education, social movements initiated with help of caste associations, and due to the efforts of individual community leaders. However, the improvement in the socio-economic-cultural conditions of OBCs has not been significant, especially in the fields of education and employment. Importantly, political opportunities continue to be monopolized by the dominant communities. The situation of marginalized people, like the nomadic and semi-nomadic communities, is worse since their numbers are small, and hence they have no clout to be noticed by the political parties. They, thus suffer the most in terms of political representation. The OBCs in Karnataka have a long way to go before they can achieve equality and social justice.

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# 15

## POLITICS AND PUBLIC POLICY OF THE DOMINANT CASTES TOWARDS BACKWARD CLASSES IN ANDHRA PRADESH FROM 1956–2014

A critical analysis

*E. Venkatesu*

### Introduction

The changing context across the globe reveals that democracy means not just the electoral mandate given by the majority of the citizens to a party by electing their representatives to rule, but also to ensure that people of all social identities, in a sovereign nation, must get their share in the decision-making and the fruits of development in proportion to their numbers. In the emerging scenario, the perception has gained ground that the role of democracy is that of a facilitator to reduce social inequalities, economic exploitation and political marginalization of the people through political accommodation, participation and formulating suitable public policies to avail their rights and entitlements in proportion to their population.

The retrospective analysis of the political process with special reference to historically marginalized people such as backward classes<sup>1</sup> in the dominant castes ruling states like Andhra Pradesh would be an authentic source for the people who have been seriously engaged in building the grassroots social movements for greater social transformation. In this chapter, an attempt is being made to analyze the socio-economic profile, nature of mobilization and policy response from the ruling elite in Andhra Pradesh.

The state of Andhra Pradesh came into existence on November 1, 1956, with the reorganization of states across the country on a linguistic basis. Thus, the three Telugu-speaking regions of Coastal Andhra, Rayalaseema and Telangana were merged to form Andhra Pradesh. Since then, the state has been ruled, predominantly, by the dominant castes of Reddys and Kammas up to bifurcation of the state into Telangana and Andhra Pradesh in June 2014 (The Andhra Pradesh Reorganization Act 2014). From the historical point of view, before the formation of Andhra Pradesh in 1956, Andhra and Rayalaseema were part of the Madras Presidency and Telangana constituted the princely state of Hyderabad ruled by the Asaf Jahi rulers called Nizam

(Srinivasulu 2002). In the post-independence period, the Visalandhra movement was successful in the linguistic unification of the Telugu-speaking areas of the Madras Presidency.

After the formation of Andhra Pradesh, initially, there were only two political parties, namely the Communist Party (then undivided) and the Congress Party. There were smaller parties too like the Krishikar Lok Party. Until the rise of the Telugu Desham Party (TDP) in 1983, the electoral contest was predominantly between the two Communist parties and the Congress. In the post-1983 period, the two parties, namely the TDP and the Congress each represented the interests of the two dominant castes, that is the Kammas and the Reddys. The control that these castes exerted over the agrarian resources of land and water was the most important source of their economic and political power. As the major land-owning communities and occupants of important positions of a village, they traditionally controlled political life. In the post-independence period, more specifically following the Green Revolution that generated surplus funds, the two castes expanded their activities into other spheres of the economy such as business, transport, contracts and industry (Upadhyay 1988). These two castes, with their economic resources and control over the political parties, systematically subjugated the largest chunk of the backward classes in the state from 1956 onwards.

In this background, an attempt is made to analyze the factors that have been preventing the marginalized people, with specific reference to the backward classes in Andhra Pradesh. The state power was in the control of the dominant castes that make up less than 15 percent of the population since its formation in 1956 to bifurcation in 2014. On the other hand, the OBCs who constitute the majority in of the population have not been able to make any headway in acquiring state power. The social groups, which have been identified as backward classes by the ruling elite, need to be examined with the question of whether they are backward in terms of capacity to produce and serve society or whether any other factors are responsible for their marginalization.

The chapter discusses the issue in three parts covering social context, mobilization and the state response to the backward classes and their political representation.

### ***Estimation of backward classes population***

Caste has long been an important dimension of social articulation and political mobilization in the state. In the domain of electoral politics, caste assumed an active role as the basis for political grouping and the mobilization of electoral support.<sup>2</sup> According to available sources, the “upper” castes comprise less than 15 percent of the population: Brahmins constitute 3 percent, Reddys 6.5 percent and Kammas 4.8 percent. According to an estimate,<sup>3</sup> the Other Backward Castes (OBCs), comprise 46.1 percent of the state’s population (Annexure 1). The Muralidhar Rao Commission of Andhra Pradesh (applying methodology similar to the one applied by the Mandal Commission) estimated the OBC population at 52 percent without, however, adding the backward classes among religious minorities (Venkatesu 2010). According to the Srikrishna Committee (Census of India 2010), BCs constitute 44.55 percent in the state. Region-wise, in Telangana, they comprise 50.7 percent if Hyderabad is included and 52.9 percent if Hyderabad is excluded from the reckoning. In Rayalaseema, the BCs constitute 42.9 percent and in coastal Andhra, 39.1 percent. These statistical data pertaining to the BC population has been taken as authentic estimation in a situation where no caste-based census has been conducted in the post-independence period. Despite repeated appeals by the various Backward Classes Associations, the state has not responded positively to include caste in the census.<sup>4</sup> From the commonsense point of view and the random sample technique, it is clear that the occupational groups put together constitute the major chunk of the population in any village of Andhra Pradesh (Reddy 1987).

## Occupation, a basis for the genesis of backward classes identity

The traditional occupations centered around caste can be the basis for the formation of the identity of backward classes. To understand the link between the occupation and identity formation, occupations of certain castes are discussed as follows (Venkatesu 2004):

1. The *Vishwabrahmin* people practice a group of occupations such as *vadrangi* (carpenter), *kammari* (blacksmith) and *kamsali* (goldsmith). Three of them are basically skill-oriented in making wooden, iron and gold articles for production and ornamental purposes. Still these occupations are in existence but hit by industrial competition.
2. The *Goud* community, which is also known by such names as *Ediga*, *Setti Balija*, *Yatha*, *Goud* and *Srisain*. are traditional toddy-tappers. They are spread throughout Andhra Pradesh but are predominant in the Telangana region.
3. The *Yadava* community's hereditary occupation is cattle-, sheep- and goat-rearing. They rear animals, sell milk and milk products.
4. The *Padmasali* is the weaving community. It claims superior social status among the backward castes and wearing of the sacred thread is a tradition. In pre-colonial times, they were the main cloth producers in the village, and they continue to practice their hereditary occupation. However, it is hard for them to compete with mills that produce synthetic cloth using modern technology.
5. The *Chakali* community's traditional occupation is to wash the clothes of all the other castes. During such auspicious occasions as marriage and festivals, they play an important role both at family and community level.
6. The *Kummari* caste makes and supplies earthenware required by the villagers. Since all kinds of metal and plastic ware have made inroads into the villages, the importance of earthenware has been rapidly declining. Some of the Kummari peoples still practice their hereditary occupation.
7. The *Mangali* people are professional barbers. They acquire hereditary rights to work for some families in the village and generations continue to serve the same families. Their presence is necessary at social ceremonies. They also play music at the time of marriages and during festivals.
8. The *Uppara* community traditionally has been the construction labor force, building all kinds of structures and digging the earth for wells, canals and so on.
9. The *Vaddera* community's main occupation is stone-cutting, both for construction and to lay roads through mountains, etc. They practice their occupation even today.
10. The occupation of *Medari* or *Mahendra* people is to make various items of use in the house from bamboo and from similar grasses. However, the community faces an existential crisis since the items they have been producing traditionally, are no longer popular, having been replaced by machine-made goods.
11. *Jalari*, *Gangaputra* and *Pallikarlu* are the names by which the traditional fishing communities have been variously known in the different regions of the state. However, their traditional boats and gear are no competition for the mechanized boats and over the years, their livelihoods have been destroyed (Venkatesu 2004).

About 25 castes, which come under Backward Classes (BCs), such as *Balasanthu*, *Bhandara*, *Budabukkala*, *Dommara*, *Gangireddula*, *Jangam*, *Jogi*, *Vaaaru Mondi*, *Mondi Banda*, *Pichaguntla Vamsharaj*, *Devara*, *Yellamma*, *Muthyalamma*, *Veeramusti*, *Nethukuntla*, *Kanjara*, *Bhatta*, *Kempara*, *Monnapatta*, *Nakkari*, *Parikamoggala*, *Kikadhi*, *Nandiveela*, *Kaatipapala*, *Kapakkula* and some

other communities traditionally entertain people through their art, tricks, physical feats and narrating, singing and enacting historical and popular classics such as Ramayana, Mahabharata and so on. They depend on the community's generosity to survive. Hence, they are often considered beggars since their main source of livelihood is alms and left-over food donated by the community.<sup>5</sup>

By the very nature of their occupations, these communities are inter-dependent in day-to-day life as their products and services are closely linked with the natural resources and functional specializations. But in patron-client (*Jajmani*) relations, the landed communities made them as dependents upon the land-owning communities.

### ***Jajmani* system for social domination**

During the ancient and medieval period, the prevalent system of patron-client relations (*Jajmani* system) (Ahuja 1994) marked the relationship between the occupational and service-rendering castes and the feudal/dominant communities, which had control over the land and power. The feudal lords used to demand and expect the labor and services from these communities either free of cost or at a nominal annual payment in kind. That was why these occupational groups and service-rendering communities were never allowed to escape from their caste-centric occupations. Despite facing several hurdles in their traditional occupations, these social groups contributed in a major way to the industrial revolution in the country. But the growth and spread of the industrial revolution in India was aborted by the penetration of the colonial exploiters into the subcontinent and making it the source of raw material for industries in Britain. As a result of colonial expansion, the emerging indigenous industrial and entrepreneurial base was destroyed. Therefore, the occupational groups participated almost *en masse* in the nationalist movement against the colonial rulers, while floating their own caste associations. In this context, one will have to look at the formation of caste associations as a part of the larger struggle against colonialism and casteism.

### **Conceptual framework to understand identity-centric political mobilization**

There has been a consensus among scholars such as Rudolph and Rudolph (1967), Hardgrave Jr (1970) and Kothari (1970) in terms of providing a more appropriate and contemporary relevant framework to understand the role of caste in modern politics and the functioning of modern politics in a caste-oriented society. The three scholars provided three models of analytical framework: 1) fission, fusion and decompression, 2) parochial, integrated and differentiated, and 3) secular, integration and ideological.

The essence of these frameworks is that in modern democratic politics, an individual alone cannot play a decisive role in the sharing and shaping of power and policies. Therefore, the group mobilization is prerequisite for which caste has been providing the numerical strength through the formation of caste associations. These associations might be ascriptive and parochial by nature, but the empirical evidence suggests that they have the capacity to be the agents of modernization and social transformation. The interests of these associations may be different, but their similar hierarchy position, social status, economic position, functional equality and occupational interdependence have brought them together and different caste associations have come together to form the federation of castes and have enhanced solidarity. Out of the new political awareness and structures, political leadership has emerged. In this background this chapter discusses the strategic instruments of caste associations and federation of caste associations used for the mobilization of backward castes in Andhra Pradesh.

### ***Rise of caste associations***

Several caste associations were formed during colonial/post-colonial times. The caste associations came into existence in response to and as a result of the impact of several movements such as the anti-colonial national movement, anti-caste social movement and anti-feudal communist movement. The caste associations which came into being in the beginning of 20th century, such as *Gouda Sangam* (Toddy Tappers Association), *Padmashali Sangam* (Weavers Association), *Munnurukapu Sangam* (Cultivators Association), *Yadav Sangam* (Milk Producers Association), etc. played the role of preparing the people of their respective communities and mobilizing them to participate in the contemporary political movements. The aim of these caste associations was to generate awareness, organize, mobilize and initiate constructive activities for the socio-economic-political upliftment of their communities (Venkatesu 2003).

The caste associations were basically products of politically enlightened activists such as Sardar Gouthu Lachhanna, Konda Laxman Bapuji and Bojjam Narsimhulu. Among the important activities they took up was to make their communities aware of the importance of education for economic upliftment, organize skilled labor as well as producers to form into cooperative societies, construct student hostels and provide scholarships for higher education. The caste associations also took up the activity of educating the community through the publication of newsletters, magazines, annual reports and other printed means. By providing financial support for political and other activities, they facilitated the emergence of leaders from among the youth. Both in the Hyderabad princely state and the colonial Madras Presidency, the caste associations initiated activities that were progressive in character and responding to new ideas and activities.

However, none of the political movements considered the caste associations as important in their politics or activities. They were either made subservient to the political movements or were co-opted. One of the best examples is of the resistance of the toddy tappers to the strategy of the communists during the armed rebellion, to cut down date and toddy palms to disrupt the flow of revenue to the Nizam government. The leaders of the movement did not consider the fact that these trees were the only source of livelihood for the large toddy tapper community (Dhanagre 1983). In response, the communists formulated the slogan of “Tree-for-Tapper” on the lines of Land-for-Tiller.

### ***Formation of the Backward Classes Association***

In the post-independence period, realizing the importance of numerical strength in the democratic political system, the caste leaders backward class associations in Hyderabad state as well as Madras state. The Hyderabad Backward Castes Association was established by Bojjam Narsimhulu in 1954 while around the same period, Konda Laxman Bapuji set up the Backward Class Association in Hyderabad State. In Andhra, Sardar Gouthu Lachhanna started the Andhra Backward Classes Mahasabha. Subsequently, as a historical necessity to meet the needs in the two states, the caste associations were federated into a Backward Classes Association to play an active role in the electoral politics for setting the agenda, articulating the needs of their people and building up the organization.<sup>6</sup>

With the formation of Andhra Pradesh in 1956 through the merging of Andhra state with Hyderabad state, the Backward Classes Associations of the two states were also merged to form the Andhra Pradesh Backward Classes Association. The formation of Andhra Pradesh Backward Classes Association was the reflection of the spirit of leaders who participated in the national movement, democratic politics and enthusiasm of the first generation of elected public representatives to the legislative bodies. But over a period of time, the ruling domi-

nant caste leaders such as Neelam Sanjeeva Reddy and his successors not only sabotaged the Andhra Pradesh Backward Classes Association but created divisions and also used it as a platform for the creation of groups among the backward classes to continue and perpetuate the rule of the dominant castes. Therefore, throughout the existence of the integrated Andhra Pradesh, from 1956 to 2014, the backward classes were subjected to several fragmentations and could not come together to challenge the domination of the Reddy and the Kamma communities.

The backward classes were effectively manipulated through the twin strategies of accommodation and co-option to perpetuate the rule of the dominant castes rather than democratize the sharing of political power. Another important shortfall in the functioning of Backward Classes Associations was the question of unity and mobilization of the highly heterogeneous social groups for the strengthening the demand for proportional representation in the electoral politics. Though the list of backward classes consists about 144 castes covering more than half of the population, when it came to the issue of consolidation, there was only vertical mobilization of about 10 castes while the rest remained disunited.

### **Policy response of the state**

The Government of Andhra Pradesh introduced some incremental policies and programs to co-opt the backward classes so that the hegemony of the dominant castes would be perpetuated (Venkatesu 2005). These policies can be classified into three categories: 1) Policies for economic upliftment, like occupational cooperatives and the program of *Adarana*. 2) Affirmative action policy in education and employment, and (3) Political empowerment.

#### **Policies for economic upliftment**

The Government of Andhra Pradesh took up two programs during two different economic periods, for the economic development of the communities who continued to practice the traditional occupations: One, the formation of cooperatives for occupational communities during the pre-globalization period, and two, introduction of the *Adarana* scheme in the post-globalized phase.

#### ***Defunct occupational cooperatives and insecurity of livelihoods***

After the formation of Andhra Pradesh in 1956, acting under the pressure from the artisan caste associations and the somewhat favorable policy support at the national level for the cooperatives, occupational cooperatives were introduced by the state government over a period of time. The policy initiative resulted in the emergence of a large number of occupational cooperative societies for weavers, fishermen, toddy tappers, dairy cooperatives, bamboo workers, washermen, barbers and contract laborers societies (Venkatesu 2004) along with primary agricultural cooperative societies. The occupational cooperative societies were introduced to prevent artisans and handcraftsmen from migration, lift them out of poverty, strengthen the existing sources of livelihood, provide economic stability, facilitate the formation of financial capital and provide access to the market. As the members of these societies organically belonged to the hereditary occupational social groups which created social affinity, the cooperative culture, market friendly environment and security of livelihoods contributed to the accumulation of surplus. The accumulated surplus from the cooperatives resulted in families buying land from the 1960s onwards that led to the rise of small and marginal farmers from among the occupational groups. However,

the introduction of neo-liberal economic policies from the 1990s onwards has affected the traditional occupations.

Several field-based case studies (Venkatesu 2004) reveal that the functioning of cooperative societies has been badly affected by globalization. From the very beginning of the implementation of the new economic policies, these societies have been facing innumerable problems ranging from the interference of politicians to complicated procedures, bogus membership, competition from industrial products, credit supply to members, stress on short-term loans and partial coverage of the occupational groups in the village, need for political influence in getting the membership in the society, lack of raw-material and market (Venkatesu 2004). The new economic policies which promoted private capital, led to the weakening of the backward and forward linkages in the functioning of occupational cooperative societies. The consequential weakening of the cooperative societies was reflected in committing a large number of suicides by rural artisans and small and marginal farmers.

### ***Failure of Adarana Scheme***

Just before the 1999 assembly and parliament election, the Telugu Desam Government headed by Chandrababu Naidu introduced a scheme known as *Adarana* (support/patronage) to provide tools and implements for the traditional occupation and service communities in order to attract their votes. The official document of the *Adarana* program indicates that it was aimed at providing modern and improved hand tools to the artisans with a view to improving their productivity, minimizing human drudgery, improving product/service quality and helping the modernization process. The ultimate goal of the program was to contribute to increased income levels and improved standards of living of the artisan communities. The program, by nature, was politically motivated, and proved to be ineffective in addressing the serious socio-economic crisis of the artisan communities. In terms of impact of *Adarana* on the economic empowerment of the backward classes, a study report observed that (Center for Industrial Development 1999):

1. More than 87 percent of the artisans is traditional by nature and engaged in caste-centric hereditary activities.
2. Activities such as milk-vending, tailoring, sheep-rearing, earthwork and fishing, were no longer restricted to castes that traditionally practiced these occupations. *Adarana* resulted in persons of other castes taking up these activities after acquiring training.
3. The per unit monthly expenditure on tools given under *Adarana* was much higher than income that was earned from them.

Asked about the usefulness of modern tools and technology in their activity the artisans had the following to say:

- i. The tools distributed were not put to the fullest use.
- ii. Not much modernization had taken place in the activities where value of the tools was less than Rs2,500.
- iii. More than 80 percent of the artisans selected their tools but were provided tools of the lowest quality.
- iv. A small percentage of beneficiaries (3–5) diverted/sold the tools that they were given.
- v. Nearly 43 percent of the beneficiaries was not satisfied with the distribution channels and inspection of tools; of them 38.2 percent also expressed doubts about quality of tools.

- vi. The educational level of the beneficiaries was poor: 41.2 percent was non-literate, 32.9 percent completed primary school, 22.8 percent up to the secondary school, 3.1 percent studied higher than the secondary level.
- vii. The view of beneficiaries on training in activities other than their traditional occupation was not encouraging. About 87 percent wanted to be trained in their traditional occupations.

The *Adarana* program was discontinued after the assembly elections in 1999 with the government claiming that it was being misused but, the Backward Classes Welfare Associations said that the program was introduced only for political gain. During the rule of Y. S. Rajasekhara Reddy of Congress, the government emphasized setting up Special Economic Zones for the economic enrichment of the provincial propertied classes while excluding the backward classes from the post-globalized economy, resulting in suicides of farmers and rural artisans.

The retrospective analysis of the developmental initiatives introduced for the economic empowerment of backward classes reveals that initially they contributed to strengthening beneficiaries economically, in terms of security of livelihoods, generating a little surplus that helped them to acquire land for farming. But over a period of time, due to the new economic policies and short-term policies meant for electoral benefit of the ruling party, these programs were of little help to the beneficiaries. The socio-economic deterioration of the backward classes is reflected in the widespread poverty prevalent among them, huge disparities and a large number of them resorting to suicides among weavers and small and marginal farmers.

### **Reservation policy in public institutions**

The policy of reservation in public institutions for education and employment for the backward people has been in operation since colonial times. In the context of Andhra Pradesh, the reservation policy evolved from two sources as the state was formed with the merging of Andhra state and Hyderabad state. In the coastal Andhra and Rayalaseema regions during colonial rule, a system of communal rotation was implemented in the public services to provide representation to the backward classes to remove inequalities of representation. The system of communal rotation in public services continued until India's independence. In the princely Hyderabad state, the government maintained a list of Backward Classes for assigning benefits to them. Therefore, from the beginning of its formation, the state of Andhra Pradesh had two separate lists of BCs identified by the two erstwhile governments.

In response to a demand from the Members of Parliament of the Backward Classes, the Jawaharlal Nehru government at the center appointed the first National Backward Classes Commission under the chairmanship of Kaka Kalelkar in 1953 and the Commission submitted its report in 1955. However, the Chairman of the Commission himself was not interested in taking caste as the criterion for the identification of BCs. He submitted the report along with his dissent note. The matter was discussed at a conference of state representatives on April 7, 1959, and subsequently at a meeting of state officers convened by the Ministry of Home Affairs, but consensus could not be reached. The central government failed to introduce reservation in central government services as it could not take any decision to compile an all-India list of backward classes; hence, reservation in the central government services for backward classes took a back seat. Subsequently, on August 14, 1961, the Home Ministry addressed the state governments on the issue: "While the State Governments have the discretion to choose their own criteria for defining backwardness, it is the view of the Government of India, it would be better to apply economic tests than to go by castes." Regarding the preparation of the lists of backward classes, the communication observed:

Even if the Central Government were to specify under Article 338(3) certain groups of people as belonging to ‘other backward classes’, it was still be open to every state government to draw up its lists for the purposes of the Articles 15 and 16. The state Governments were to follow their own lists and thus, any All-India list drawn up by the Centre would have no practical utility.

As a consequence, it became obligatory for the state governments to evolve the criteria for the identification of backward classes.

In this context, the government of Andhra Pradesh amalgamated the two lists, brought out a new list of backward classes and reserved 25 percent of seats in medical colleges, invoking Article 15(4) (Government of Andhra Pradesh 1963). However, the validity of the order was challenged in the High Court of Andhra Pradesh in the case of *Sukhdev vs Government of Andhra Pradesh*. The High Court struck it down on the ground that the order has been made exclusively on the basis of caste. The state failed to explain the reasons in taking caste as the only criterion for determining the backwardness of a community. Then, the government ordered the preparation of a new list keeping in view the direction of the court to consider economic criteria (Venkatesu 2004). The government also constituted a cabinet subcommittee in 1966 to look into the matters of the backward classes. The subcommittee adopted the following six criteria for the preparation of the backward classes list: 1) poverty, 2) low standard of education, 3) low standard of living, 4) place of habitation, 5) inferiority of occupation and 6) caste.

Accepting the list of backward classes prepared by the cabinet subcommittee, the government of Andhra Pradesh issued a Government Order (GO) Ms. No.1880, Education, dated July 29, 1966, for the implementation of 20 percent of reservation in employment for the backward classes in the departments of health, housing and municipal administration. This order too was challenged in the High Court. A batch of 104 writ petitions was filed in the High Court and after several hearings, the High Court struck down the GO on October 7, 1967, stating that the list of backward classes was not based on any statistical data and was prepared without including the test of poverty. The Andhra Pradesh government appealed against the verdict in the Supreme Court, but the Supreme Court upheld the High Court’s order.

Then, the Government of Andhra Pradesh appointed a Commission in 1968 under the Chairmanship of Manohar Pershad<sup>7</sup> to enumerate socially and educationally backward classes. However, the Chairman resigned and Anantharaman was appointed as Chairman in his place. The first Backward Classes Commission of Andhra Pradesh thus came into being.

### **Anantharaman Commission**

The most important of the terms of reference of the commission was to determine the criteria to be adopted while preparing the list of backward classes and make suitable recommendations for their upliftment. Accordingly, the commission prepared criteria for the identification of backwardness on the basis of cultural, economic, educational and social backwardness. It submitted its report on June 25, 1970. The commission identified 92 castes to be included in the backward classes list. The commission recommended 30 percent reservation for the four categories of backward classes.

### **Government action on the commission report**

Accepting the report, the state government issued an order for the implementation of 25 percent reservation for the 93 castes identified as backward classes in the four categories (Table 15.1).<sup>8</sup>

Table 15.1 Groups, Castes, and Percentage of Reservations

No.	Group	Name of the communities	% of Reservations
1	A (38)	Aboriginal Tribes, Vimukta Jatis, Nomadic and Semi-nomadic tribes	7
2	B (21)	Vocational groups	10
3	C (1)	Harijan Converts	1
4	D (33)	Other backward classes	7
Total	(93)		25

(Source: *Welfare of Backward Classes*, a detailed document published by the Department of Backward Classes, Government of Andhra Pradesh, 1996, pp. 608–34).

Thus, 25 percent of all seats in all categories of courses in general, professional and technical educational institutions were reserved for the four categories of backward classes, from the first year of graduation to post-graduation.

This order too was challenged by the aggrieved upper castes in the Andhra Pradesh High Court. The High Court ruled that the order was invalid. Chief Justice Pingali Jagannath Reddy in his judgment stated that the backward classes list was not valid because the socio-educational profile of the listed backward castes was not properly studied.

The state government appealed against the judgment in the Supreme Court which upheld the order and also the list of the socially and educationally backward classes on June 12, 1972. The Supreme Court *inter alia* observed that a caste is also a class of citizens and as such a caste can be socially and educationally backward, the reservation made of such persons will have to be upheld notwithstanding the facts that a few individuals in that group may be both socially and educationally above the general average.<sup>9</sup> Thus, from 1972 onwards, the socially and educationally backward classes have benefited from reservations in the educational institutions and in public employment. Thus, the concept of social justice for the socially and educationally backward classes became a reality because of the decision of the Supreme Court (Shankar 1979).

An independent India took three decades to deliver a modicum of justice for the backward classes in Andhra Pradesh through 25 percent of reservations. During the long-drawn-out legal battles, the political pressure created by the Backward Classes Associations played a significant role, both at the center as well as at the state level in achieving the reservation quota.

### ***Muralidhar Rao Commission***

To implement another recommendation of the Anantharaman Commission, that is to review reservations after 10 years, the Muralidhar Rao Commission was appointed by the government in 1981. The commission submitted its report in 1982 with the recommendation of increasing reservation for the backward classes from 25 percent to 44 percent. The report gathered dust for four years before it was implemented by the government in 1986 mainly because the Telugu Desam Party (TDP), launched by the leading Telugu film star N.T. Rama Rao in 1982, promised in its election manifesto to implement its recommendations.

The TDP swept into office with N. T. Rama Rao as the Chief Minister in 1983. After three years in office the government announced in 1986 that the Muralidhar Commission recommendation of 44 percent reservation would be implemented. The decision was vehe-

mently opposed by the upper castes stating that the meritorious people would be deprived from government employment. The anti-reservation movement was started by the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad, the student wing of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the Andhra Pradesh Navasangharashana Samiti and Parents Association. These organizations organized protests against reservation across the state, specifically in the urban areas. They disrupted the daily life by staging *dharnas*, *rasta rokos*, *gheraos* and so on. Almost all the media houses, which are owned and staffed by the provincial propertied classes/castes, extended full support to the agitation by extensive coverage, flooding the newspaper pages with photographs in full support of the agitation. The state machinery, including the police department, took a soft line in dealing with the anti-reservationists (Balagopal 1986).

As in earlier cases, a full bench of the High Court of Andhra Pradesh consisting of one Scheduled Caste judge, one Backward Caste judge and one forward caste judge struck down the GO on the principal ground that the Muralidhar Rao Commission's estimate of the population of BCs at 52 percent of the state's population was erroneous. It also expressed itself against a reservation policy that reserves more than 50 percent of jobs and seats in educational institutions.<sup>10</sup> Pressurized by the anti-reservationists, the Chief Minister agreed not to appeal to the Supreme Court against the High Court judgment.<sup>11</sup>

### Policies for political empowerment

One of the most important administrative reforms taken by the N. T. Rama Rao government was the abolition of the hereditary and traditional local revenue posts of *Karnam* (village level revenue collectors) and *Munsab* (village level official overseeing law and order). These posts, often hereditary and monopolized by the upper castes, were highly exploitative and dominated the local political power structure. These two institutions were instruments of the social suppression of the "lower" caste people by not allowing them to wear footwear, new clothes and or even have shelter. They were also used by political parties as votebanks, especially the Congress Party. Therefore, the abolition of these two institutions not only freed the "lower"-caste people from feudal forces but also weakened the local political base of the Congress Party.

To bring the community and the local developmental administrative machinery closer to the community, the TDP government bifurcated the existing Revenue *Taluka* (Revenue subdivision) into three *Mandal Panchayats* (Middle *Panchayat*). Apart from making the middle panchayat closer to the people, the government also introduced 34 percent reservations for the backward classes in local bodies such as Village Panchayat, Mandal Parishad Territorial Constituency (MPTC), President of the Mandal Parishad, Zilla Parishad Territorial Constituency (ZPTC), Chairman of the Zilla Praja Parishad and Municipal Councilors and Chairmen. The provision of 34 percent reservations for the backward classes significantly contributed to the transformation of the power dynamics of the local government since it facilitated for the entry of BC men and women into constitutional positions for the first time in the post-independence period.

After overthrowing N.T. Rama Rao as Chief Minister in August 1995, Chandrababu Naidu, his son-in-law and right-hand man, became the Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh (Srinivasulu and Prakash 1999). He introduced neo-liberal reforms and made Andhra Pradesh a crucible for economic reforms experimentation. In the process of implementing neo-liberal reforms, in accordance with World Bank policies and guidelines, the state government created several parallel institutions for developmental programs. These programs were supposed to be implemented by local government institutions. With the rise of parallel institutions promoting people's par-

ticipation such as Self-Help Groups, Water Users Associations, School Management Committees and the launching of *Janmabhoomi* program, while making bureaucrats as the nodal agency, led to the concentration of the power in the hands of dominant castes thereby diluting the growth of the backward classes that was promised by reservations both at the state level and at the grassroots level.

Another instance sabotaging the reservations for the backward classes was the postponement of the elections to local bodies which were supposed to be held in 2011–12. The GO reserving 34 percent in the local/grassroots/Panchayati Raj institutions was challenged in the Andhra Pradesh High Court arguing that the 34 percent of reservations in the local bodies exceeded the Supreme Court ruling of 2010 that reservation should not exceed 50 percent.<sup>12</sup> The GO was stayed, and the elections postponed.

### **Party politics and backward classes**

The ruling dominant castes were clever to exploit the weaknesses of the backward classes in terms of inter-caste differences between them and their inability to mobilize their numbers. The dream of the backward classes of one of them occupying the post of Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh could not be realized. Besides, the representation of the backward classes in the party-based electoral politics was also very small. For instance, in the Andhra Pradesh Legislative Assembly their representation was a mere 14.9 percent; in the Lok Sabha 13 percent; in the Rajya Sabha 8 percent; in the state cabinet 15 percent; in the union cabinet 7 percent; among the Speakers of State Legislative Assemblies 8.9 percent.

The details given in the Table 15.2 and 15.3 (Chatterjee 2009) also reveal the hold of the dominant castes on the political processes of Andhra Pradesh.

Since formation of Andhra Pradesh in 1956, only two parties, that is the Congress and the Telugu Desam Party, have been in power up to its bifurcation in 2014. The social profile of the elected public representatives of these two parties shows that the two dominant intermediate castes of Reddy and Kamma, which together constitute about 11 percent of population, have monopolized political power, ruling over 89 percent of the people of Andhra Pradesh. This situation can be summed up thus:

The higher the population size, the lesser the representation (of the oppressed people); and the lesser the numerical strength, the greater the political domination (by the dominant castes).

*Table 15.2 Party Politics and Accommodation of Backward Classes: Caste Affiliation of Indian National Congress MLAs, 1955–99 (in Percentage)*

Caste	1955	1962	1967	1972	1978	1983	1985	1989	1994	1999	2004
Upper castes	11.9	7.3	5.5	7.3	6.3	6.7	6.0	5.5	-	2.2	3.3
Intermediate castes	51.0	46.1	48.5	40.6	43.9	35.0	52.0	53.6	76.9	65.6	60.8
OBC	6.0	9.6	13.3	21.0	17.6	31.7	20.0	11.6	7.7	13.3	16.3
ST and SC	16.6	26.4	21.8	22.8	21.5	21.7	12.0	18.2	11.5	13.3	16.3
Muslims											
Others	14.6	10.7	10.9	8.2	10.7	5.0	10.0	11.0	3.8	5.6	2.2
Total	101.0	101.0	100.0	99.9	100.0	101.0	100.0	99.9	99.9	100.0	100.0

Table 15.3 Caste Affiliation of TDP MLAs, 1983–2004 (in Percentage)

Caste	1983	1985	1989	1994	1999	2004
Upper castes	4.9	4.5	4.1	3.7	2.3	0.0
Intermediate castes	52.2	47.5	59.5	57.5	55.9	47.0
OBC	18.7	21.8	12.2	18.2	11.9	33.0
ST and SC	17.7	19.3	16.2	17.3	21.5	20.0
Muslims and others	6.4	6.9	8.1	3.3	8.5	0.0
Total	99.9	100.0	101.0	100.0	101.0	100.0

### Summing up

The retrospective analysis of the backward classes in Andhra Pradesh for the last six decades indicates that they have been subjected to a systematic alienation, suppression, exploitation and marginalization in every sphere, that is, social, economic and political. They participated enthusiastically in every social and political movement including the freedom struggle, lower caste movements and leftist movements. Subsequently, realizing the importance of numbers in democratic politics, the backward classes forged alliances with other backward castes to form a federation of backward classes associations.

The ruling dominant castes made every effort to thwart efforts for unity among the backward classes as it posed a big threat to their power and position. Therefore, as a part of the conspiracy to economically weaken the backward classes, the societies that were set up to strengthen the traditional occupations were neglected and not provided with any backward and forward linkages to promote their products. Instead, the products of industries, owned by the dominant castes were given the encouragement and concessions needed to capture the market and entrench themselves. To sabotage the efforts of the backward classes to avail of educational and employment opportunities provided through reservations by the state, several problems were created from legal, administrative institutional and political angles. The notional representation that has been given to backward classes through reservations in local bodies has contributed neither to the rise of powerful leadership nor in effectively running local government; also, there has been institutional erosion due to the creation of parallel institutions at the local level. In terms of party politics, the backward classes were considered as nothing more than a votebank and have been used to perpetuate the political domination of the dominant castes. As a result, no person belonging to the backward classes could become the Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh or were the backward classes ever accorded representation in tune with their numerical strength either in government, political parties or in the administration. Justice continues to elude the backward classes.

### Notes

- 1 The backward classes is the official term used for notifying more than 144 castes and classifying them into five categories as A, B, C, D and E on the basis of nature of occupation such as service, artisan, religious conversion and agricultural background and religious minorities. See for the list of backward classes, [http://www.bctimes.org/caste\\_list/bccastlist.pdf](http://www.bctimes.org/caste_list/bccastlist.pdf) and Annexure 1. Here the backward class is not synonym to the Marxist sense of class. The term is used as administrative category for policy making.
- 2 Ibid., p. 3.
- 3 Srinivasulu, K. Ibid.

- 4 Interview with V. G. R. Naragoni, a BC Association activist in Andhra Pradesh.
- 5 Mahatma Jotirao Phule Academy of Backward Castes Development and Empowerment. Backward Castes Sub Plan. Warangal: India, 10.
- 6 See for details *Ibid.*, pp. 145–81.
- 7 He resigned on October 1, 1969 and K. N. Anantharaman was appointed as Chairman on 29<sup>th</sup> October 1969.
- 8 GO No. 1793, Education, dated September 12, 1970.
- 9 *The State of Andhra Pradesh vs U. S. V. Balaram* in A.I.R. 1972 S.C.P. 1375.
- 10 *Ibid.* Andhra Pradesh, Reservation: The Court says No, *Economic and Political Weekly*, September 20, 1986, p. 1681.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 1680.
- 12 <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/andhra-pradesh/high-court-stays-local-body-elections/article2109074.ece>, June 16, 2011.

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**Annexure 1**  
**Percentage Breakdown of Total Population of Andhra Pradesh**

<i>Forward castes</i>	<i>% of total</i>	<i>Backward castes</i>	<i>% of Total</i>	<i>Scheduled castes</i>	<i>% of total</i>	<i>Others</i>	<i>% of total</i>
Brahman	3.0	Balija	3.0	Madiga	7.3	Muslims	7.0
Kapu	15.2	Boya/Besta	0.7	Mala	9.7	Christian	
Kamma	4.8	Chakali	4.2			Others	
Komati	2.7	Devanga	2.1				
Kshatriya	1.2	Dudekula	0.4				
Vélama	3.0	Goundla	2.0				
		Gavara	0.4				
		Golla	6.3				
		Idiga	1.0				
		Jangam	0.4				
		Kammara	2.1				
		Vishwa	0.9				
		Brahmana	1.3				
		Kummari	0.8				
		Kurma	1.3				
		Munmurukapu	3.3				
		Mangali	2.9				
		Mutrasi	5.2				
		Sale	0.6				
		Telaga	1.8				
		Uppara	5.4				
		Waddera					
		Others					
Total	29.9		46.1		17.0		7.0

(Source: Census of India (1921) and Census of H. E. H. Nizam's Domain (1921)

# 16

## OBC MOVEMENT IN MAHARASHTRA

### Reclaiming the Bahujan legacy

*Lata Pratibha Madhukar*

#### **Introduction**

This is a very critical period not only in Maharashtra but in the entire country. Even as the chapter was being written, three distinguished personalities, Dr Narendra Dabholkar, Comrade Govind Pansare and Prof Kalburgi were murdered. The culprits have not been punished seven years on. Dabholkar and Pansare were Brahmin by birth and Kalburgi a Lingayat but throughout their life they challenged Brahminism, the dominance of the priestly dominance/God's agent-centered malpractices in religion. They followed Phule-Ambedkarism and fearlessly fought against superstitions. In this context, followers of Dalit-Bahujan ideology are obviously facing challenges. Analyzing the present conflict situation and the struggles against casteism in Maharashtra, one cannot but conclude that the main reason for this situation is revivalism, the main goal of which is to demolish all progressive movements in the country. The state of Maharashtra has discontinued the scholarships to backward caste students, and clearly, the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) continue to be victimized by caste bias and hierarchy. The challenges facing the Adivasi, Dalit and OBC people have increased. In addition to their rights to life and livelihood being destroyed and threats faced mainly from globalization, they are now being threatened by the state policies and hardcore Brahminism both in the public and private spheres. Therefore, the need to study the history of the various struggles by the various oppressed communities and relate them to the ongoing movements of Dalit-Bahujan people because only they have the political will and strength to challenge the day's politics and bring about an egalitarian society. In this chapter an attempt is made to bring out ideology, struggle and the present status of OBC movement in Maharashtra.

#### **Legacy of idols and ideology of Satyashodak, non-Brahmin and Phule-Ambedkarite movements**

The emergence and spread of social movements in 19th century in India was known popularly as the social reformist movement. This terminology was very well accepted by sociologists, historians and political scientists until the emergence of Dalit-Bahujan movement. In the mid-1970s, the Dalit-Bahujan movement sharpened a perspective based on the Phule-Ambedkar

vision and ideology. This also has given a research methodology of truth-seeking. It was an era of movements of Dalit-Bahujans, tribals, minorities and women giving the impetus for reinventing, reclaiming and rewriting the history of the contribution of real heroes (male, female, third gender, etc.). This period gave rise to new terminology like her-story, oral history, history of working class, tribals' history, history of people's saga, subaltern history, Dalit-Bahujan's history, gendering history. In short, it set off a wave of rewriting history.

In 1976, Gail Omvedt's book *Cultural Revolt in Colonial Society* published by the Scientific Socialist Education Trust, Mumbai, made a critical analysis of Brahminism, the revolts against it, and the contribution of social revolutionaries like Jotirao Phule and Shahu Maharaj as well as the leaders from Satyashodhak and Non-Brahmin movement in 19th century.<sup>1</sup> Until that time, such a nuanced analysis had not been written on the various peoples' movements in the 19th century and of Brahminical politics around the issues of caste and gender. In this chapter, I have taken the same line and tried to understand the OBC movement in Maharashtra.

The "OBC" movement in Maharashtra, as elsewhere in the country, was set off in response to the acceptance by the central government of the Mandal Commission report. Students and youth belonging to the privileged castes went on a rampage as violent opposition to it spread across the state. Social scientists who have written books on OBC movements in India see this movement in two phases, the Pre-Mandal and the Post-Mandal. The OBC movement in Maharashtra has its own specific dimensions but it emerged as part of a movement at the national level demanding the implementation of the Mandal report. In the face of widespread reactionary movement by anti-Mandal forces, at the state level, the OBC movement engaged with state OBC castes. At the national level, the response to the anti-Mandal movement was in the formation of an alliance or network.

However, the mainstream politics and media were successful in creating the illusion that OBC politics had only one agenda and that was reservation. Thus, the emergence of the OBC movement faced severe opposition from the beginning. In this context, one cannot forget the self-immolation of Rajiv Goswami against the Mandal report and reservations and Indra Sawhney's case and the intense debate on the correctness and viability of the OBC reservations.

The propaganda war waged by the privileged-caste-dominated media greatly set back the OBC movement since the politics of inclusion dominated the debate that effectively blurred the historical context of the long struggle for *identity* and *dignity* of Shudras-Bahujans. It also created many misconceptions and spread propaganda about the socio-economic status of the OBCs including the one that said OBCs were feudal and rich, and as a class it had enough economic resources considering they were a group of landlords. This argument was evidently without any understanding of the fact that a total 3,743 castes identified as OBCs mostly faced exclusion, were economically poor, unrecognized socially and culturally as people whose contribution to the country's revenue through food and raw material was always more than that of the Brahmin and other upper-caste people. The groups that were already getting reservations such as the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) were also given the belief, wrongly, that the OBCs' reservation would be at their cost. Thus, the situation of the OBCs who were already targeted by the upper castes became like that of a drum, getting hit from both sides. This forced the OBC organizations to take up the major task of raising awareness of the situation of the OBCs, demystifying the claims of prosperity among the OBCs, and how the Shudras had been exploited for thousands of years and kept away from education, employment and their rightful share in political representation.

Thus, without an understanding of the long legacy of Satyashodhak and Bahujan movements of the past, we cannot understand the OBC movement in Maharashtra in modern

times. The Satyashodhak and Bahujan movements questioned caste-based hegemony, inequality, exclusion, untouchability, struggling against their own people who did not want to rock the boat of caste-imposed subordination, feudalism, and the social system of Brahminism practiced by the so-called upper castes or Uchhavarnas and Savarnas. Mahatma Jotirao Phule first articulated the human rights of the Shudra-Atishudras (lower and lowest castes in the Hindu religion) and of women of all castes in the 19th century in Maharashtra during colonial rule. Significantly, Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar acknowledged Phule, Buddha and Kabir, as his Gurus and introduced Phule's work to Dalits. Interestingly, the literature on Mahatma Jotirao Phule's movement for empowerment of the Shudra-Atishudras and women and literature on his Satyashodhak movement was extensively circulated by the Dalit movement in Maharashtra, rather than the Bahujan movement. The Maharashtra government has further promoted study of the work of Phule by setting up a research center named after him, the *Mahatma Phule Abhyas va Sanshodhan Kendra*.

In Phule's times, Brahmanism ruled and consequently created fear of the upper castes among the Shudra-Atishudras. Additionally, the oppressed people had internalized the inferiority/superiority concept. Obviously, there would be opposition for the movement of Jotirao and Savitribai Phule and their ideology that was asking them to break the traditions of 1,000 plus years. This opposition came not just from Brahmins in Pune but from the family of Phule and the community to which the Phules belonged. Several contemporary reformists and nationalists opposed the Phules. In such a situation, the work of the Phules was made doubly difficult and yet they mobilized like-minded people, disseminated information among them and won over a large number of people to their movement's principles of Sarvajanik Satyadharma and Satyashodhak philosophy. This philosophy included propagating common schools for all including Shudra-Atishudras, imparting education to girls and women, organizing farmers, spreading traditional trade, encouraging youth from lower castes to give up their traditional caste occupations and take to new spheres of work whose demand was increasing, such as construction industry. The Phules were also busy with writing and delivering speeches, searching for tools for researching, reinterpreting and reinventing history. As a result, the Phules attracted several followers to their Satyashodhak ideology including women from different castes and religions. However, this cultural revolt did not find support among the non-Brahmin people as had happened in Tamil Nadu. In his analysis of the socio-political trajectory of the mobilization against Brahminism in Tamil Nadu, Jaffrelot says that it suggests a pattern of low caste mobilization comprising at least four chronologically organized elements. First, the caste associations emancipate themselves of the Sanskritization elements, practices, ethos or adopt aggressively egalitarian values, as in the case of the Nadars. Jaffrelot quotes Hardgrave to point out that the Nadars have a generally strong bias against the caste system (Jaffrelot 2014). "Maharashtra did not fulfill all the criteria of this model but complied with its general spirit. While ethnicisation of caste was initiated by the Satyashodhak Samaj, the Sanskritization ethos, and caste practices, more generally speaking, remained pervasive among non-Brahmins especially the Marathas."<sup>2</sup>

In Maharashtra, the Peshwas played a major role suppressing the lower castes, women and in placing increased importance on Sanskritization. While all the non-Brahmins in Tamil Nadu came together to forge their common identity as Dravidians, such a formation of a common identity proved difficult despite the efforts of first Phule and then, Shahu Maharaj. Here one should understand the power politics played by Marathas post-Shivaji, resulting in Brahminization. Despite the non-recognition by the Brahmins of Shahu as shown by the incident of Vedokta there was no mass revolt by Marathas and other lower castes in support of Shahu or against Tilak.

Jaffrelot observes that

the quest for low caste empowerment—whose architect was Shahu Maharaj—did not generate the same sense of solidarity as among the non-Brahmins of Madras Presidency precisely because there was no such category (non-Brahmins) in the administration of Kolhapur State or in the reservation policies of the Bombay Presidency.

In spite of the legacy of such revolutionary social movements, the nationalist movement for freedom from colonial rule yet again played the card of “one Hindu nation” with the result that Brahminism, with the leadership of the national movement, was taken over by Brahmins and Baniyas. The leadership remained with these castes even after independence and the result is that more than seven decades after independence, the major issues of social inequality, caste-based discrimination, a high rate of illiteracy and unemployment among the OBCs remain unresolved. On the other hand, the upper castes, who comprise a minuscule proportion of population, monopolized all resources needed for human development and are at the top of the social and economic ladders.

If the policy of reservation had been implemented simultaneously for SCs, STs and OBCs after independence as Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar had dreamed of and had introduced an Article 340 in the constitution (setting up a commission to study the socio-economic conditions of the OBCs), today OBCs would have been in the same stage of awareness and assertion as Dalits. But the Poona Pact between Mahatma Gandhi and Babasaheb Ambedkar did injustice to not only Dalits but it seemed to justify the pseudo nationalists’ argument that asking for reservations or separate constituency meant polarizing the Hindus. In spite of Gandhiji’s move in favor of upper castes, Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar took his demand back out of human considerations and saved Gandhiji’s life.<sup>3</sup> This is aptly summed up in a song of the Dalit Movement sung by Bhau Panchbhai. The two lines translated are quoted below:

Bhimrao Ambedkar a leader of millions of Dalits has saved life of Gandhi, but one Brahmin has killed Gandhi and taken his life.

However, Gandhiji went on a fast in Pune jail to keep intact the so-called Hindu religion, preferring to deny separate electorates to the SCs as their political rights. Actually, 1,000 years of history is evidence that in the Hindu religion there was no scope for “untouchables” to develop as human beings and inequality was the basis of Hindu religion. Ironically, the preference of Gandhiji for upper-caste Hindus was forgotten by Hindutva fanatic forces and Godse, a Brahmin, killed Gandhiji.

In 1970, several movements emerged including Jayaprakash Nayaran’s movement or Total Revolution led by several students and youth organizations affiliated to Marxists, socialists, Maoist-Leninists, Congress and Jana Sangh (which name was later changed to the “Bharatiya Janata Party”). The contribution of the socialist leader Ram Manohar Lohia’s thinking was significant. The groups were very much influenced by Lohia’s position that in Indian society caste plays a major role in maintaining inequalities. When the union government rejected the report of the Kakasaheb Kalekar Commission, Lohia’s dissent was remarkable as he maintained that caste, much more so than class, was the basic unit of Indian society and that Nehru’s version of socialism would not be enough to combat inequalities. Several leaders of the OBC movement also follow the Lohiaite school of thought whose ideology saw society not just in a class perspective but also in the caste and gender perspectives, very much following the Phule-Ambedkarite line.

### Phule-Ambedkarite and Subaltern perspectives

The Subaltern perspective that emerged in the late 20th century was based on Gramsci's philosophy has been used as an all-encompassing umbrella under which the emerging ideologies of the marginalized and the excluded people found refuge. Subaltern theory has given a historical, theoretical push to bring out the issues of the common people, that is, the Dalit, Bahujan and women. One cannot deny that the Phule-Ambedkarite perspective is an Indian subaltern discourse, a forerunner of the Subaltern discourse. The Subaltern discourse focuses on identity politics, assertions for dignity, empowerment and so on. In the Indian context, we need to note the transformation and the modifications of the identity symbols from 1865 to 2015. Now, many activists from the Dalit movement want to assert themselves as new Buddhists or Ambedkarites rather than calling themselves Dalits. For administrative purposes they prefer to call themselves SCs. As Chhaya Khobragade, a leader of Sambodhini Mahila Parishad, Nagpur argues,

Once upon a time we have used an identity as Dalit, very powerfully, it is our historic struggle but now we have overcome from the phase of "broken people" (Dalit) identity, and due to Ambedkarism and Buddhism we got new identity.

She says further that the SC category is a label for their economic and oppressed status. To achieve equality in education and employment with the rest of the society, they need reservations, hence "SC" is their administrative identity, provided by the government.<sup>4</sup>

Similar rationale could be used for OBCs, as they seek to mobilize themselves to assert their rights for their social, educational and economic empowerment. Their identity as "Bahujan" is a powerful historical, political and cultural identity. This is a unique identity, an umbrella for 3,747 castes with diverse cultures. As a homogenous identity it has given them the strength to struggle for equal social status and opportunities. It has managed to keep intact the diversities and pluralities of the various member-communities of this group that has claimed a historical legacy from Buddha to Phule to Ambedkar to Shahu-Periyar.

The phrase "*Bahujan Hitay, Bahujan Sukhay*" was used by Gautam Buddha. "Bahujan" means not "Sarvajan" meaning *all* people. Among "all" most of the people are deprived, exploited, subjugated by a few people's power.

### Bahujan as an idiom for Shudra-Atishudra: Homogenous identity

The Buddha's concept of "working for the interests and happiness of Bahujan" was first picked up by the non-Brahmin movement in Maharashtra. A leader of the non-Brahmin movement in the early 20th century, Vitthal Ramji Shinde, popularized the use of the nomenclature "Bahujan" and mainstreamed it. The word was then adopted by the cooperative movement.

The term Bahujan word shows the numerical strength of the oppressed people. Yet they are scattered in the caste hierarchies and divided in layers, practicing caste-based social discrimination against those who were placed lower to them in caste hierarchy, a discrimination that can be said to be practiced by OBCs against OBCs. The people from the backward classes are mostly belonging to backward *castes*. In Phule's dictionary they were "Shudra-Atishudra," a working class which comprised communities practicing agro-based and supporting activities. Most of the castes of artisan/skilled activities were self-employed. A rural agro-based economy could not have survived without this interdependence and reciprocal contribution to each other.

The resistance by the Dalit-Bahujans to the violence and discrimination by and due to the caste system has taken several forms over the years, and yet, it has been so deep-rooted that even

after several insurgencies, it persists to this day. But in a modern democratic state like India, there is a possibility of making inroads and constructing an egalitarian society using democratic instruments such as the constitution which has provisions for amendments in laws and creation of the policies to promote its basic aim of ushering in an egalitarian society. Hence, this study is based on the understanding that the commissions, their recommendations, policies and amendments for inclusion of the excluded people as the processes, means and media leading towards an egalitarian society. Otherwise, it would be an irony as it was with Chhara, a nomadic tribe that was treated as criminal, whose settlement was close to Gandhiji's Sabarmati Ashram but Gandhiji could not associate with their pain and to date they have not been able to be freed of an identity as born thieves and criminals.<sup>5</sup> There are several such stories of OBCs in India and Maharashtra. There, several such castes are struggling for their inclusion as well as castes with powerful dynamics like Marathaas, Patidars, Jats and Gujjars fighting now to declare them as Backwards. This has complicated the struggle of the deprived castes' struggles to access livelihood, education and employment as guaranteed by the constitution. The Patidars have threatened that either the Patidars are included in the OBCs or discontinue reservations entirely. Clearly, there is a hidden threat to push back the OBC movement.

However, the Dalit-Bahujan idiom has become a discourse and also theory since 1967 in Maharashtra after the emergence of the Dalit Panthers. Kanshiram recharged it by forming the Bahujan Samaj Party in 1984. He thus made "Bahujan" a symbol of Shudra-Atishudra identity in popular politics on the national level. After the split in the Republican Party of India, Prakash Ambedkar, a leading advocate and a grandson of B. R. Ambedkar, named his party "Bharatiya Republican Bahujan Mahasangh." (In 2019, it was renamed Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi and fought the legislative assembly elections.) In western Maharashtra, the Satyashodhak movement played a crucial role in disseminating Phule's ideology. A movement emerged in 1980 for the implementation of the Mandal report under the name of Bahujan Sangharsh Samiti. Some OBC groups have taken names like Satyashodhak OBC Parishad, Samata Parishad and so on.

The term "Bahujan" reflects an ideology of assertion while "OBC" reflects the social, educational and economic status of marginalized people. While describing the non-Brahmin movement in Maharashtra, Jaffrelot says that it is an ideology of empowerment. He says that Phule's Bahujan Samaj, the lower caste is autochthonous or native to the land, by which Jaffrelot reaffirms a meaning beyond its numeric strength and brings back its indigenous and organic existence in Indian society. The term also brings the diversities spread in different lower/lowest castes under one umbrella (Jaffrelot 2003).

*The Farmer's Whipcord* was the first account of (Bahujan) farmers' conditions in India, written by Mahatma Jotirao Phule in 1881, which talks about the consequences of social exclusion into deprivation from economic development and insisted on education. He says in the Preface, "The book is written to give an exposition of a few of the numerous reasons connected with religion and politics that have put the Shudra farmers in such a pitiable condition."

As Jotirao Phule famously said in his pioneering work on the plight of Shudra farmers, *The Farmer's Whipcord* (1881), without education wisdom was lost, without wisdom, morals were lost, without morals development was lost, without development wealth was lost, without wealth the Shudras were ruined. He concludes, "So much has happened through lack of education" (*The Farmer's Whipcord* 1881).<sup>6</sup>

About 125 years ago, Jotirao Phule tried to bring backward castes, women and men under one umbrella category and brought consciousness among them about their exploitation that it was not because of their fate but because of the Brahminical religion. He spread the view that castes and gender-based exclusion were unjust and inhuman and this perspective from the human rights angle was totally new for the people who never had any rights, leading their life

by Brahminical religion-based diktats. In 1873, he wrote a book called *Ghulamgiri* or Slavery which has become a manifesto for all deprived castes and genders (Keer et al. 1991). In 1900, the social reformer Ayyankali (1863–1914) of the princely state of Travancore, started a movement against the discrimination of Dalit children and in 1907 he led the farmers' strike in Venagoor in present-day Kerala. Shahu Maharaj (1874–1922) was among the first kings who challenged caste discrimination and made reservations in education and employment for the youth of marginalized minorities and non-Brahmins. In Tamil Nadu, the Self-Respect Movement under the leadership of Periyar (1879–1973), the Socrates of South-East Asia, was the first public expression against exclusion. There were several peaceful movements, including the ones led by the above-mentioned personalities, to secure the rights to entry into temples and access to temple roads for people of all castes. Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar (1891–1956) took forward this legacy by incorporating it in the Indian Constitution. Dr Ambedkar has used the words “exclusion” and “excluded” through his Marathi language periodicals *Bahishkrit Bharat* (Excluded India) and *Muknayak* (Leader of Voiceless) in 1927 and demanded for special constituency for depressed castes.<sup>7</sup>

Kancha Ilaiah<sup>8</sup> believes the term “Dalit-Bahujan” refers to and encompasses the Scheduled Castes and the Other Backward Classes, the people and castes who were among the

exploited and suppressed majority. Historically, it was in the struggle of the Dalit-Bahujans against the Hindu order, the Brahminical system which had captured the state and used it as an instrument to impose the caste ideology, that Dalit-Bahujans converted in large numbers to Buddhism, Sikhism, Islam and Christianity. These were social protest movements to gain social rights and self-respect. The whole Buddhist phenomenon in our early history was a story of Dalit-Bahujan protest. The Buddha says, “Just as various different streams flow into a river and become one, so, too, the different castes, when they come into the sangha (the community of the Buddhist faithful), they join the sea of colourless water.” This stress on social equality is, of course, in marked contrast with Hinduism, which cannot be defined in terms of a universal religion with a universal social rights concept. It is simply another name for oppression. I have serious problems with Brahmin writers who say Hinduism is “a way of life.” As I understand it, it is nothing but a means for exploitation of the Dalit-Bahujan.

Kancha Ilaiah speaks of a “Dalitisthan,” in a way quite similar meaning and vision given by Nagesh Chaudhari of the Bahujan Sangharsh Samiti of a “Bahujan Rashtra,” of an India as Bahujan nation based on the values equality, equity, fraternity and freedom for all.

## **OBCs in Maharashtra**

Regarding the recognition of a large number of castes and communities as backward it was pointed out: if entire community, barring a few exceptions, has thus to be regarded as backward, the really needy would be swamped by the multitude and hardly receive any specially attention or adequate assistance

*(Mandal Commission Report, p. l)*

The Mandal Commission identified a total 3,743 backward castes that represented 52 percent of the country's population. Noting that OBC only occupied 12.5 percent of civil service posts, it recommended a 27 percent reservation for them. In Maharashtra, there were a total of 346 castes included in the Other Backward category in which were included several subcastes which

means that there are layers of hierarchy within the Mali caste. Even today marriages between subcastes are rare since caste hierarchy clearly marks one subcaste as superior to another.<sup>9</sup>

Most of the OBCs are dependent upon physical labor being small farmers, agricultural laborers, artisans, small vendors, producers and pursuing several such occupations for their livelihood. In the process of colonization and industrialization many of the traditional and caste-based occupations were affected and as many as 60 percent of OBCs turned into laborers. Nationalizing industries and collectivizing land would never lead to revolutionizing the social order because the upper castes would continue to exercise real social domination on the basis of skills handed down from father to son “for thousands of years” (to use Lohia’s expression). In the case of the lower castes, who were in need of not only socio-economic redistribution, but they also needed to shed their feelings of inferiority inculcated in them for thousands of years. As experts noted, a lack of homogeneity and the presence of class differences within the backward castes, the various movements could not consolidate into one. They have remained fragmented and politically marginalized in states as also at the center.

### **Dalit movement as vanguard of insurgency of OBC movement**

Dalit Panther was a starting point of fermentation (Omvedt 2006) of new social convergence into not only Buddhism but Phule-Ambedkar, Shahu-Periyar’s ideology. It influenced like-minded youth from socialist, Marxist-Leninist-Maoist or Trotskyite organizations and introduced them to the reality of the caste system and how castes are classes in India. Gail Omvedt says that

Nevertheless, the fragmentation of the Panthers was only an episode in a long upsurge. Not only did Dalits continue to organize and fight back but they also provided major themes of revolt to other new assertions of the time. If the proletarianization of Dalit identity was a new universalism, a new claim to being a kind of vanguard it was also an effort to define the entire Indian revolution in terms of the upsurge of the low castes, the theme of ‘we are the proletariat’ being expressed in numerous poems and constantly in speeches. It was typical, for instance, that the Panther leader Arun Kamble, speaking of the Mandal Commission and the need for unity between Dalits and Non-Brahmins at a Vishamata Nirmulan Conference in 1980s could argue for a Kunbi-ization of Marathas (i.e., accepting their identity as toiling peasants rather than as village rulers), and end with assertion for Dalitistan.<sup>10</sup>

### **Emergence of social movements**

Social scientists have defined the emergence of several movements in the period 1965–85 as new social movements. “The ‘Unique Journey’ seemed to begin in the 1970s. Numerous youth went to the villages, new activists rose from the masses, social turmoil increased as economic and social pressures mounted, and new voices rose as other low-caste and oppressed sections joined the Dalits in organizing.”<sup>11</sup>

OBC leadership in Maharashtra has emerged from various contemporary movements. Many of the young activists belonged to Jayaprakash Narayan and Lohia’s ideology-based students and youth organizations like Chhatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahini and Yukrand. These organizations along with veteran leaders like Baba Adhav, Nagesh Chaudhari and Yadunath Thatte organized workshops and classes on the annihilation of discrimination (Vishamata Nirmulan Shibir) which spread support for an egalitarian society based on liberty, equality, fraternity and

equity. Most of the youngsters who came from peasant castes were attracted to Sharad Joshi-led Shetkari Sanghatana, some joined issue-based struggles like Narmada Bachao Andolan. Some of them also became cadres in student wings of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI (M)), Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) (CPI (ML)), but most of the Dalit-Bahujan from these student organizations opted for Republican and Bahujan politics. The men and women cadres of the upper castes moved on from political activism into social activism and established NGOs and they emerged as leaders. The youth involved with Dalit Bahujan groups joined the Bahujan Samaj Party of Kanshiram. Significantly, these cadres remained mostly as cadres even though they were popular among the people, but the face of the organization remained Brahmin and upper caste. For instance, the parties admitted as members not Dalits and OBCs but also other upper castes and even Brahmins. On the contrary, the Shiv Sena (known as a reactionary party) was the only party where OBCs, Dalits and even Muslims progressed from being cadres to leaders in their own right to the level of constituency and even higher. Interestingly, while it was the only political party which opposed the OBC reservation, terming it votebank politics and a means to divide Hindus. As Dipankar Gupta analyses,

The interesting development in this regard is that in contemporary times both the BJP and the Shiv Sena are trying to break the stranglehold of the Congress ... The Sena-BJP strategy in this respect is to induct members of backwards castes into the boards of these cooperatives, in order to wrest control from the traditional bosses.

(Gupta 1996)

### **Analysis of the OBC movement and its different streams**

An analysis of the OBC movements and their different streams is undertaken to understand their similarities/differences in terms of their objectives, ideology and actions.

The first stream named “Bahujan” claims a relationship with Satyashodhak, non-Brahmin, Dalit and progressive secular (Marxist/socialist) movement. It is based on Phule-Ambedkar, Shahu-Periyar’s ideology. The unique features of the Bahujan stream in the OBC movement are as follows:

1. This is a radical stream, strongly anti-superstition, sometimes atheist and adopts alternative symbols from the legacy of the rebellious tradition of Buddha and Mahavir. It follows the path of Phule’s Satyashodhak, Periyar’s movement for Self-Respect, and Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar’s annihilation of caste. The traditionally inclined OBCs do not associate with this stream except on the issues of reservations.
2. In Maharashtra, Jotirao Phule and Savitribai Phule were not only pioneers of education for girls and lower castes (Shudra-Atishudra), but they were the first couple who attacked Brahminism and the cruel practices it imposed both on the vulnerable of their own community like widows. Phule, through his Satyashodhak Samaj, ushered in marriage reforms, doing away with Brahmin priests and meaningless rituals. His organization was a platform that brought Dalits and OBCs in fighting the supremacy of Brahmins. Movements such as Satyashodhak and non-Brahmin movements challenged the hold of Brahmins and Brahminism and caste, thus paving the way for social change. This revolt was not only cultural (Omvedt 1995) but it was basically loosening the foundation of Brahminism-based exclusion. It understood that Brahminism was a deeply rooted sabotage against the working class to keep them under their hegemony as also creating layers of self-perpetuating

hegemonies. The revolt begun by Shahu Maharaj in the early 20th century was carried forward by Phule.

3. According to Nagesh Chaudhari, president of Bahujan Sangharsh Samiti, during the British rule many among the Bahujans became revolutionary. The British rulers extended their support, much to the anger of Brahminical forces. The Brahmins adopted many fronts seemingly to oppose Brahminism, but in reality it was to sabotage the movement from within. Some adopted socialism, others joined communist organizations. In fact, the freedom struggle was also a fight against the awakening of the *mulnivasis*. The revolt of 1857 was a battle of independence for Tilak and Savarkar but to Phule it was a counter-revolutionary act of the Brahmins. The British not only successfully suppressed the 1857 mutiny but also refrained from continuing the reforms that had antagonized the Brahmins. In a way, it was the success of the reactionary Brahmanical forces. Since then, the Brahminical battle of independence gained momentum and it culminated in their victory in 1947. British rule was not directly exploitative of the Bahujans. On the contrary, the British facilitated the revolutionary social reforms of Jyotirao Phule, Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj, Periyar Ramsami and Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar. Thanks to them, not only did the movements blossom and gain ground, but they broadened, spreading the idea of human rights among the Bahujans. Thus, the OBC movement in Maharashtra has a rich history of revolting against the caste system, against cultural hegemonic practices and modes of exploitation based on discrimination.

In this stream one can include organizations like the All India Backward and Minority Communities Employees Federation (BAMCEF), Bahujan Sangharsh Samiti, Satyashodhak Movement in western Maharashtra, Maphua (Sharad Patil), Shramik Mukti Dal, and OBC Mukti Morcha.

Nagesh Chaudhari says that everybody in power in the states and the center serves the Brahmin first and others later. This is simply internalization of Manusmriti in which Manu says that the ruler should look after the needs of Brahmins first and then of other Varnas-Castes. In modern India too, this precept is being followed partly because Brahmins are dominant in every field, whether bureaucracy, administration, cultural, literary or religious affairs. No central government dare gives equal share to the lower castes, Dalits, BCs or minorities. Brahmins decide the policy and government implements it. The state has promoted and made standard the Brahmanic-Sanskritized language which is vastly different both in grammar and pronunciation from the language spoken by the masses. This is yet another hurdle that makes the journey of a Bahujan difficult and impacts their personality as it inculcates a feeling of inferiority and inadequacy. The Bahujan's struggle is also to protect the language of the masses. Thus, the OBC movement is not merely to enable entry of Bahujans into education and improve their economic status but also to reduce biases against them prevalent everywhere and open up all the fields that were hitherto closed.

Bahujan Sangharsh Samiti (BSS) is a forum of OBCs working in the Vidarbha region since 1980. BSS started out as a collective and later evolved into a prominent representative of the OBCs in Vidarbha. It became a part of national level OBC alliances and networks. BSS and its sister organization OBC Mukti Morcha organize various activities and festivals such as Satyashodhak conferences, Lokbhasha Sammelan, Baliraja festival, celebrations of the work of Mahatma Phule, Savitribai Phule, Dr Ambedkar, Shahu, Gadge Maharaj and so on. These occasions are used as alternatives to Brahminical priest- and ritual-centered festivals to raise awareness, bringing Bahujan farmers, laborers and women together and acquainting them with the history of the Bahujans.

The Satyashodhak movement actively mobilized Bahujans and shared with them the Phule-Ambedkar vision. It also organized protest rallies and public meetings when the Babri Masjid was demolished in 1991 by right-wing Hindutva activists. While the movement can be considered successful in Maharashtra especially in Vidarbha, Mumbai-Thane-Konkan and North Maharashtra, it could not make much headway in organizing the OBCs in Uttar Pradesh.

Shrawan Deore of Nashik a founder of a Maharashtra OBC organization started a unique campaign along with Janardan Patil. They carried a copy of the Mandal report that had been translated into Marathi, met leaders of a large number of organizations to educate them about the importance of the contents and importance of the Mandal report. Similar campaigns were organized in other regions of Maharashtra like Vidarbha, North Maharashtra and Marathwada. Shrawan Deore today is considered a prominent voice of OBCs. Shrawan Deore and Shobha Deore founded Satyashodhak Chhatrapati Dnyanpeeth (university) which has included Bahujan leaders' philosophy in the curriculum. It also conducts exams on their activities and philosophy to popularize and emphasize the legacy of the Bahujan leaders. This is considered an innovative way of introducing the Bahujan leaders to the new generation. Deore also organized OBC literary gatherings for OBC men/women writers. The meetings would invariably discuss OBC politics as well as Bahujan writers and literature. Shrawan Deore, along with Dr Pradeep Dhoble, a prominent union leader of OBC employees and workers, set up an organization called OBC Sewa Sangh.

Bahujan women too have assumed leadership in promoting their people's interests. Equipped with education, positions and social networks women leaders have shared the responsibility of contributing to the awakening of the Bahujans. Ms Sai Thakur (Assistant Professor, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai) has played a significant role in raising the pro-reservation voice in the media as also in the Indian Institute of Technology, Mumbai. The following letter is an example of how the Bahujan students and faculty members successfully faced and countered the anti-reservations lobby. The edited version of the letter by the young leader Sai Thakur written in 2006 is given in the box below.

Dear friends,

This is to show the behaviour and thinking of those who dominate the premier institutes of higher learning towards reservation and our communities which have been deprived socially and educationally.

On 22nd May (2006), a group of 39 IIT students went on a relay hunger strike against reservations. Those who are pro-reservation sat on a Dharna on 22nd night. Two of us sat on a hunger strike. Several media including newspapers and TV channels covered the anti-reservation strike. Many of them talked to us also. But there was a vast difference in the kind of coverage that we got and the coverage that the other camp got. The media failed in its responsibility to portray truth. In fact, one of the dailies (*Navbharat Times* of May 24, 2006) printed our photographs claiming that we were anti-reservation people.

The anti-reservationists throughout the day came in small groups and discussed the issue with us. Many of them who were OBCs who did not support reservation ... some of the anti-reservationists had an extremist stand ... And they kept insulting us by saying that "Backward communities cannot compete with us in IIT." The situation had become quite tense then.

On May 24, 2006, some faculty members invited the two sides for a discussion. The anti-reservationists refused to participate in it. But on the day of discussion, they came an hour late and accused the faculty of being biased. The discussion was long and is outside the scope of this report. But one point needs to be highlighted. When one of the anti-reservationists said there should be dignity of

labour and that all professions—carpenters, farmers, potters and so on, should be respected, we asked if that was so then why were anti-reservation doctors in Delhi, sweeping the ground as a protest? One of the anti-reservationists responded, that they were actually showing dignity of labour which “you do not have.” The absurdity of the comment apart, do they qualify to teach us the dignity of labour. Do our communities which have earned their livelihood for several hundred years through manual labor have to learn dignity of labour from them? Or are they telling us not to aspire for jobs which are meant for them?

This is a brief summary of the activities that were taken up by the Pro-preservationist group in IIT Bombay. The IIT Bombay community is visibly divided with many faculty members openly coming out in support of reservation in their individual capacity.

Regards,

Sai Thakur, for People for Social Justice, IIT Bombay.<sup>12</sup>

There is a very small and almost invisible stream of OBC women leaders and activists known for their contribution to various movements and keenly aware of the intersections of gender, caste, class and patriarchy. The male leaders of the OBC movement invite them occasionally onto the stage, use their celebrity status for inaugurations or to attract a crowd. They give them space as spokespersons but do not share leadership or include them in the decision-making processes. Interestingly, most of the male leaders are against a quota within a quota in the context of the proposed 33 percent reservation for women in the parliament. But in their organizations they employ women in clerical positions or as receptionists, in charge of hospitality during conferences, and in such insignificant and stereotyped roles as singing songs, receiving guests, introducing guests and so on. While the men lecture on Jotirao and Savitribai Phule’s companionship and quote the opinion of Phule, Shahu, Ambedkar and Periyar on the need for equality for women, they do not see the irony of themselves assigning women to secondary status in their organizations and in meetings and similar gatherings. Most of the male leaders do not allow women from their caste and families to participate in public functions. If a few broad-minded men do get wives to their meetings, often the wife serves as the secretary to the husband rather than participate in terms of speaking or conducting the meeting. The Bahujan men have not changed their attitude towards women. The OBC women too have not been empowered like the Dalit women, and hence they are happy to celebrate festivals, follow rituals, cook and feed family. They are always available to their men; and are reluctant to assert their rights or their daughters’ rights. Men do not seem to realize that they are betraying the legacy of Phule-Ambedkar-Shahu-Periyar. However, the OBC women are learning to come together and fight for their rights by founding their own organizations like Mahila Aghadi (OBC Women’s Front).

### **Muslim OBC movement in Maharashtra**

The OBC movement has brought out into the open that every religion in India is afflicted by the caste system. At a conference of Muslim OBCs and Dalits held in New Delhi in 2005, which was presided over by Justice Rajendra Sachar, the noted scholar Asghar Ali Engineer pointed out that while Islam does not recognize caste distinctions, Indian Muslim society is based on various caste and ethnic communities. The Muslims are not homogenous in sociological and even theological terms. They are divided into numerous sects, and, in India, into various caste

groups as well. Hence, to take them as a single unit and to deny these internal differences within the community would not only perpetuate the differences but further reinforce structures of marginalization. He criticized those, mainly “upper” caste Muslim spokesmen, who claim that raising the problems of the “low” caste Muslim communities is “anti-Islamic” and a conspiracy to divide the Muslims. He said that this denial was a means to perpetuate the hegemony of “upper” caste Muslim leaders and *ulema*, who present an image of Muslims as a seamless monolith. He also opposed the proposal, put forward mainly by “upper” caste Muslim leaders, that all the Muslims of India be declared a “Backward Class,” and hence, made eligible for reservations in government jobs. He said reservations should be available only to those Muslim communities recognized as Dalits, Tribals and Backward Castes.<sup>13</sup>

A majority of Muslims are OBCs ... Presently, over 58 castes in the Muslim community have been included in the OBC category and 10 castes in the Denotified Nomadic Tribes (DNT) category. Similarly, Muslim castes like Tadvi Pathans and Cheetah Pardhis have been included in scheduled tribes (ST), while others are in the scheduled castes (SC) category.

### **Hindutva fanaticism and challenges**

The right-wing Hindutva has polarized the lower castes on religious lines and is using them for its political ends. On the other hand, the reservations issue is being used in every election by mainstream political parties to garner votes.

Today the BJP might have given the country a prime minister born in a backward caste but ideologically the BJP and the other sister Hindutva organizations have always been opposed to reservations, whether during the Mandal movement or today when the demand for conducting a caste census is gathering steam. The concept and the dream of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the Hindutva fountainhead, to usher in a “Hindu Rashtra” is facing competition in the form of a “Bahujan Rashtra.” The veteran activists like Dr Narendra Dabholkar, Prof. Govind Pansare and Prof. Kalburgi were murdered by this fanatic force. If we study the serial killings, it is clear that all of them were born into the Brahmin caste but had become rationalists and believers of equality. They were opposed to caste discrimination, and propagated the Phule-Ambedkarite vision, Marxist/socialist ideology, and challenged the traditions of rituals and superstitious beliefs of Hinduism. The killings are a clear statement by the Brahmins that any opposition to Hindu Rashtra will not be tolerated.<sup>14</sup>

### **Hindu Rashtra verses Bahujan Rashtra**

In this background, the idea of “Bahujan Rashtra” has been floated by the Bahujan Sangharsh Samiti, an organization that emerged from OBC movement in Vidarbha. *Bahujan Sangharsh* is a periodical, edited by Nagesh Chaudhari that has been published regularly since 1994. Editor Chaudhari says,

The subjugation, exploitation and suppression of native Bahujans will not stop unless the Bahujans free themselves from the thrall of Hindu Rashtra. Economic exploitation and poverty is an outcome of Hindu Rashtra. Hindu Rashtra would mean that all non-Brahmins would have secondary status in all aspects such as social, religious, cultural, and political. The Bahujans would be made refugees in their country, become rootless in their own motherland, denied self-respect and rendered voiceless. Their

economic situation would be such that they remain in a state of perpetual deprivation, dying every moment. They would be reduced to begging and wandering; toiling for the Brahmins and getting enough to keep them alive. Their culture and language would have been destroyed completely. They would be made to feel that they were unworthy of living a life of a normal human being. The powerful would tighten the noose of slavery to such an extent that they would become mere robots, doing what is told, nothing more, nothing less. In other words, they would be rendered so helpless that even life would become a burden for them.

Chaudhari argues that if the religion they believe in denies them dignity and piles humiliation on them, then how could a “Hindu Rashtra” give justice to them. On the other hand, a “Bahujan Rashtra” would give them a homogenous identity displacing the caste system. The concept of a Bahujan Rashtra gained ground in the post-Mandal period.

We can see a linear progress in the movement: In Mandal I the Bahujans were demanding the implementation of the report; in Mandal II, awareness was spread regarding the recommendations of the report regarding reservations, procedures, etc.; in Mandal III there is a growing rethinking among the Bahujans about molding a new identity that will enable them to live with dignity and without discrimination and that they would have to consider leaving the Hindu religion.

The late Hanumant Upre, a founder leader of Satyashodhak OBC Parishad of the Marathwada region and a professor of zoology, had planned mass conversion of OBCs to Buddhism, of at least five lakh OBCs. He believed that originally all OBCs were Buddhists and belonged to Nagavanshi. They were subjugated by Hindu rulers. Prof. Upre planned to embrace Buddhism along with 6,000 OBC families and had set October 14, 2016, to complete his task. He hoped to fulfill at least partially Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar’s hope of seeing India as a Buddhist country. However, he passed away on March 19, 2015.

## **Conclusion**

The OBC movement in Maharashtra got a boost with the acceptance of the Mandal report and OBC-centric politics became an agenda item for every political party. The other commissions that studied the problem of backwardness of the majority of the Indian people such as Sachar, Misra, Naciappan also played a decisive role. The plight of the minorities and the fact that they too suffered from caste discrimination came to the fore. Subsequently, women too were brought into the circle of the OBC question thanks to the discussions around the 73rd and 74th amendments to allot 33 percent reservation for women in the elected bodies like the Lok Sabha and the state assemblies. Later on, privileged castes like Jat, Gujarati, Patidars and Marathas began to demand reservations. Upper caste women’s representatives baulked at the concept of a quota within a quota to OBC women while the male OBCs were reluctant to give positions in their party to OBC women representatives. The issue of women’s reservation was sidelined as no party, either ruling or opposition, was willing to “sacrifice” their “share” to women, whether OBC or forward caste.

From the 1980s onwards, the OBC leadership that emerged due to the movement in Maharashtra, seems to come alive when topical issues are raised, like a caste census. But so far, youth leaders like Hardik Patel of Gujarat’s Patidar movement are yet to emerge in Maharashtra. Most of the OBC leaders seem to be interested in projecting themselves rather than in investing in developing new leadership among the youth. The OBC students who are taking advantage of scholarships, reservations and similar benefits do not seem to be interested in the issues of fellow

OBCs nor do they seem to have developed awareness of their community's issues like the Dalit students. The upwardly mobile among the OBCs seem to be tilting towards Brahminical values and western lifestyle.

At the ground level, among the 347 communities of the OBCs in Maharashtra, only five or six prominent OBC castes are dominant in terms of socio-economic-political status and are emerging as the elite. The rest remain mired in poverty, facing massive odds in every sphere of life. There is as yet no networking of OBCs nor has any common platform emerged. Whatever activity is taking place is only based on the individual leaders' agendas rather than the empowerment of the entire people of OBCs. Whatever movement was there in the past, shaped and fostered by Bahujan luminaries, has receded into the background in the present due to lack of "leaders" with vision, inclusivity and strategic planning to meet newer challenges posed by such developments as globalization. The new complexities thrown up by globalization and the new economic policies have endangered whatever gains the OBCs have made due to reservations, putting at stake the very existence, identity and dignity of the OBCs.

The Dalit-Bahujan movement therefore has to take a clear stand to oppose globalization if Phule-Ambedkar's utopia of an egalitarian society of "Bahujan Hitaya" is to be achieved. This would be possible if all people, of all genders, Shudra-Atishudras and the marginalized among minorities get their basic human rights, leading to a society that ensures that everyone enjoys liberty, equality, fraternity, equity and dignity. Phule found utopia in the kingdom of Bali and Sarvajanik Satyadharma while Ambedkar found it in rational and empathy-based Buddhism. The OBCs may well find it in a society that restores ecological balance, protects natural resources for all human beings and ensures that all other living beings will thrive on planet Earth.

### Notes

- 1 Note: "Cultural revolt in colonial society" was Gail Omvedt's first research, which she submitted to Columbia University in 1973. In India, it was published in 1976. After this research, Gail decided to stay on in India and started her work with tribals, farmers, Dalit, Bahujan and women. She is well-known as a feminist who has given a new perspective of viewing gender and caste from the standpoint of Dalit-Bahujans not only in the discipline of Women's Studies but also in Sociology, Political Science and Economics.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Note: Poona Pact, (September 24, 1932), agreement between Hindu leaders in India granting new rights to untouchables (low-caste Hindu groups). The pact, signed at Poona (now Pune, Maharashtra), resulted from the communal award of August 4, 1932, made by the British government on the failure of the Indian parties to agree, which allotted seats in the various legislatures of India to the different communities. Mahatma Gandhi objected to the provision of separate electorates for the Scheduled (formerly "untouchable") Castes, which in his view separated them from the whole Hindu community. Though in prison, Gandhi announced a fast unto death, which he began on September 18. But Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, the leader of the untouchables, who felt that his group's special interests might be advanced by the government's system, resisted concessions until Gandhi was near death. He and the Hindu leaders then agreed to the pact, which withdrew separate electorates but gave increased representation to the Scheduled Castes for a 10-year period. Ambedkar complained of blackmail, but the pact marked the start of movement against untouchability within the Indian nationalist movement.
- 4 Interview with Chhaya Khobragade, a prominent Dalit activist and writer from Dalit movement Nagpur. She is founder of Sambodhni Mahila Parishad.
- 5 Gaikwad Lakshman (2013), Article in E-Sakal, October 13, 2013, p. 7. Out Casted. (In Marathi)
- 6 From the book the *Farmers Whipcord*—"Due to a counterfeit and tyrannical religion, the dominance of Brahman employees in all government departments and the luxury-loving indolence of the European government employees, the Shudra farmers are tormented and deceived by the Brahman employees.

- The intention of this book is to protect them from this deprivation and so it has been given the name of ShetkaryacaAsud” (Phule,Jotirao, *The Farmers Whipcord*, translated by Gail Omvedt and Bharat Patankar).
- 7 Patil S. (1987) Das Shudranchi Gulamgiri (Marathi) (1987) Omvedt Gail (2004) Jotirao Phule and the ideology of social revolution in India: CriticalQuest,January 1,2004 – Religion – 32 pages Rege, S. (2010). Education as Trutiya Ratna: Towards Phule-Ambedkarite Feminist Pedagogical Practice. Economic and Political Weekly. Retrieved from <http://www.epw.in/special-articles/education-trutiya-ratna-towards-phule...>
  - 8 Kancha Iliaiah, in *The Hindu* published on February 7, 2015. See <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-opinion/caste-corruption-and-romanticism/article4536167>
  - 9 Note: In June 2008, some more castes were added, some castes were deleted or rectified in OBC, NT and SBC categories on the basis of three reports, No.18 to 21, of the State Backward Class Commission submitted to the government during 2006 and 2007 and published vide Maharashtra Government Letter No.CBC-10/2006/P.No.94/MVC-5 of Department of Social Justice, Cultural Affairs & Special Assistance, Mantralaya Extension Building, Mumbai-32 dated June 25, 2008.
  - 10 Ibid., p. 79.
  - 11 Ibid., p. 80.
  - 12 <http://www.claimonnation.blogspot.in/latest>
  - 13 The Milli Gazette Online, November 30, 2005, Sikand Yoginder. “Muslim Dalit and OBC Conference: A Report.”
  - 14 Nagesh Chaudhari. Bahujan or Bali Rashtra <http://bahujansangharsh.org/index.php?view=article&catid=35:articles&id=53:bahujan-or-bali-rashtra-q-g-front-page-no-yes-section-select-section-uncategorisedab>

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# 17

## OBC LEADERSHIP AND ELECTORAL POLITICS IN UTTAR PRADESH

*A. K. Verma*

This chapter has, broadly, two parts. In the first part, it focuses on the rise of the backward caste movement and the leaders who led that movement since independence in Uttar Pradesh (UP). The second part deals with the electoral politics of UP especially since 1989 which signified the upsurge of backward castes in the wake of acceptance of Mandal Commission recommendations and their co-option by newly formed parties, especially the Samajwadi Party (SP). We also examine whether there was an interconnection between the robustness of the backward caste movement and the political empowerment of other backward castes (OBCs) in UP.

### **Rise of backward caste movement in UP**

Before we proceed to discuss the rise of the backward caste movement, let us be clear about the terms backward class, backward castes and other backward classes (OBCs). While the Constitution of India talks only about a backward class of citizens in Article 15, the common political discourse has come to use the term backward castes. Article 15(4) says:

Nothing in this article or in clause (2) of article 29 shall prevent the State from making any special provision for the advancement of any socially and educationally backward classes of citizens or for the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes.

This clause was inserted by way of the First Amendment to the Constitution in 1951. The constitutional understanding of the term “backward classes” meant socially and educationally backward classes of citizens that included the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs). While the constituent assembly debated and knew who SCs were, and the constitution empowered the president to draw up lists of STs in different states after consulting various governors in respective states, nobody knew who the “other backwards” were after the SCs and STs were subtracted from the backward class of citizens. There were no all-India lists in that respect (Yadav 2002).

It was left to the First and Second Backward Classes Commissions appointed under Article 340 of the constitution to deliberate on the same and recommend the criteria for the determination of socially and educationally backward class of citizens. Both the Commissions—Kaka Kalelkar (First)

and Mandal (Second)—recommended caste as the most important criterion for the determination of backwardness. Since SCs and STs were constitutionally recognized categories of socially and educationally backward classes of citizens, the other cluster of castes that qualified for socially and educationally backward classes of citizens obviously came to be known as the “other backward castes” (OBCs). Hence, the term OBC applies to the backward castes that are usually placed in the middle of the caste hierarchy; above the OBCs are the upper castes that include Brahmins, Thakurs, Vaishya, Kayastha and below the OBCs are the Dalits that include SCs. It is to that social denomination that we would be referring to when we use the term backwards or OBCs in this chapter.

The backward caste movement in northern India came late compared to southern India. The movement came to UP at the end of the 1960s (Verma 2007). There are conflicting views why the backward movement took off early in the south. Rudolph (1967) argues that ritual repression of backwards by Brahmins in the south led to an early movement there whereas others argue that backwards achieved higher economic status than Brahmins due to their successful political mobilization in the early 20th century and resented the dominance of Brahmin castes (Vokkaligas, Lingayats, Pallis, Chettis, Vanniyars, etc.) in administrative services (Chaudhury 2004). In north India, especially UP, backward castes were neither mobilized nor came into conflict with upper castes despite being land-owning castes, because Dalits worked as a buffer between the two, both upper castes and middle castes (land-owning backward castes) exploited Dalit labor.

The history of backward caste mobilization in UP could be traced back to the late 1950s and the 1960s under the leadership of Dr Rammanohar Lohia, Kanshi Ram and Chaudhary Charan Singh. But, the Other Backward Classes (OBC) movement in UP has never had a distinct and autonomous character until the arrival of Mandal in 1989. The OBC mobilization in UP was first a part of the socialist movement under Dr Ram Manohar Lohia during the 1950s, then became a part of the agrarian movement led by Chaudhary Charan Singh in the 1960s (since 1967) when he quit Congress and formed his own party Bharatiya Kranti Dal (BKD) to be succeeded by the Backward and Minority Community Employees Federation (BAMCEF) movement under the patronage of Kanshi Ram in the 1970s.

Dr Lohia was perhaps one of the first in India not to feel shy of the caste-based mobilization of backwards. Instead of the Westernized pursuit of democracy and class, Lohia preferred political mobilization along traditional symbols and primordial loyalties like caste rather than class (Sinha 2005). He argued that the horizontal mobilization of the lower castes on the basis of explicit appeals to caste identities had substantial political potential for organizing the poor and the deprived (Sheth 1999). Notwithstanding that, he was against casteism and launched *Jati Todo Aandolan* (movement to break castes), and also, focused on all those who comprised backward Dubey 2011). class *viz.*, SCs, STs, OBCs, backwards among minorities and women for whom he demanded *Vishesh Avasar* (special opportunities) advocating 60 percent political and economic space (Dubey 2011). For Lohia, caste was a stumbling block to India’s progress. In Lohia’s words, “Caste restricts opportunity. Restricted opportunity constricts ability. Constricted ability further restricts opportunity. Where caste prevails, opportunity and ability are restricted to ever-narrowing circles of the people” (Verma 2007b Seminar 571). Lohia’s mobilization strategy was driven by socialist ideology that was under the influence of Gandhian framework advocating decentralization, constructive programs, non-violent protests and satyagraha. Precisely because of its twin features of backward mobilization and socialist orientations, Lohiaite philosophy continues to form the bedrock of the SP in UP that claims to represent the political aspirations of the OBCs.

Another impetus to the backward movement in UP came from Kanshi Ram under the broad rubric of backwards, Dalits, tribals and minorities called the All-India (SC, ST, OBC)

and Minority Communities Employees Federation (BAMCEF). The aim was to mobilize the elites of the Bahujan Samaj who had benefited from the quotas (Jaffrelot 1998). Though the BAMCEF movement was designed to benefit all except the upper castes, the focus was on Dalit mobilization. It was unfortunate however that Kanshi Ram could not prevent BAMCEF from degenerating into the formation of a caste party called the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP). The formation of the BSP laid the foundation for the Dalits and backwards in UP to take different trajectories that harmed both.

Chaudhary Charan Singh must also be partially credited with the mobilization of the backward castes though in a limited manner. After he quit Congress in 1967, Charan Singh formed a new party called Bharatiya Kranti Dal (BKD) which was mainly based on the mobilization of Jats and Yadavs in western UP. The BKD was originally perceived as a backward caste movement that tried to mobilize those castes *viz.*, Jats, Yadavs, Kurmis, Koeris and so on that had status as cultivators and herders and had yet to acquire the status of a class (Pai 1993). However, the caste movement spearheaded by Charan Singh was accused of being anti-Dalit and as one that neglected the petty farmers of eastern UP. Thus, the backward movement in UP was an integral part of the wider subaltern movement till the arrival of Mandal in 1989.

For the first time, the OBC movement took some semblance of an autonomous movement when the Janata Dal government under the Prime Ministership of Vishvanath Pratap Singh decided to accept the Mandal Commission recommendations giving 27 percent reservations to OBCs in government jobs at the fag-end of the 1980s, though that still formed part of a wider pro-reservation movement that was supported by the Dalit community as well. The acceptance of the Mandal Commission provided a platform to the backward energy to assert its identity, compete with the forwards and, in the process, generate some social conflict between pro-reservationists and anti-reservationists. After a quarter of a century since Mandal, the backward upsurge is becoming politically salient in UP as demonstrated by the fact that the state politics has come to be totally dominated by the two variants of the backward class—the OBCs on the one hand, and the Dalits on the other, represented by two parties, the SP and the BSP, respectively.

### **The backward movement in UP**

The backward movement in UP had three major salient features. First, the movement acquired three-dimensional developmental dynamics: it developed horizontally, rose upwards and percolated downwards. Second, the backward mobilization used three channels: one, through mobilizing peasant castes/class; two, through mobilization of the lower middle class of government servants; and three, through mobilization of middle and lower castes. Third, backward movement and mobilization in UP followed neither the Bihar model (through peasant mobilization) nor adopted the Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan model (co-option by Congress and the BJP), but charted an independent and autonomous trajectory that differed from both. In that sense, the OBC movement in UP could be said to have set a model for other states to emulate.

### **Developmental dynamics**

The Mandal is a watershed in the backward mobilization and political empowerment in India. The mobilizational dynamics unleashed energy that very robustly filled political space in all of northern India filling the political space in all directions—horizontally as well as vertically, both upwards and downwards.

The horizontal advance of backward mobilization was especially significant because the entire backward caste group was badly divided; the 89 castes among OBCs were divided into three subcaste categories. In the first category were Yadavs (also called Ahirs, Gwalas, etc.), in the second more backward caste (MRBC) category were eight castes mainly Sonar, Kurmi, Gujjar, Lodh, etc., while in the third category of most-backward castes (MBC) there were 70 castes *viz.*, Kushwaha, Shakya, Kahar, Koeri, Mallah, Nishad, Kewat, Lohar, etc. (Table 17.1). The three groups are not only socially differentiated, but do not have much social intercourse evidenced by the fact that marriages between the OBC subcastes are not allowed traditionally. A Yadav will not marry into the Kurmi or Sonar subcastes. But, due to the collective consciousness of the backwards post-Mandal, the subcastes categories transcended their social differentiations and coalesced into a homogenized common backward caste movement that looked very massive and

Table 17.1 OBC Categories in UP

S. No	Part of schedule	Name of OBC castes	Number
1	Other Backward Classes (OBCs)	Ahir/Yadav/Gwala/Yaduvashya	1
2	More Backward Classes (MRBCs)	Sonar/Sunar/Swarkar, Jat, Kurmi/Chanau/Patel/Patanwar/Kurmi-Mail/Kurmi-Seinthwar, Giri, Gujar, Gosain, Lodh/Lodha Lodhi/Lot/Lodhi-Rajput, Kamboj	8
3	Most Backward Classes (MBCs)	Arakh/Aravanshiya, Kachchi/Kachchi-Kushwaha/Shakya, Kahar/Kashyap, Kewat/Mallah/Nishad, Kisan, Koeri, Kumhar/ Prajapati, Kasgar, Kunjra or Raeen, Gareria/Pal Vaghel, Gaddi/Ghoshi, Chikwa/Qassab Qureshi/Chak, Chhippi/Chipa, Jogi, Jhoja, Dhafali, Tamoli/Barai/Chaurasia, Teli/Samani/Rogangar/Sahu/Rauniar/Gandhi Arrak, Darji/Idrisi/Kakutstha, Dhiver, Naqqal, Nat (those not included in SC), Naik, Lohar/Lahar-Saifi, Lonia/Nonia/Gole-Thakur/LoniaChauhan,Rangrez/Rangwa,Marchcha,Halwai/Mo danwal, Hajjam/Nai Salmain/Savita/Sriwas, Rai Sikh, Sakka-Bhisti/Bhisti-Abbas, Dhobi (those not included in SCs/STs), Kasera/Thathera/Tamrakar, Nanbai, Mirshikar, Shekh/Sarwari (Pirai)/Peerahi, Mev/Mewati, Koshta/ Koshti, Ror, Khumra/Sangatarash/ Hansiri, Mochi, Khagi, Tanwar Singharia, Faqir, Banjara/Ranki/Mukeri/Mukerani, Barhai/Saifi/Vishwakarma/Pachaal /Ramgadhiya /Jangir/Dhiman, Bari, Beragi, Bind, Biyar, Bhar/Raj-Bhar, Bhurji/Bharbhunia/Bhooj/Kandu/ Kashaudhan, Bhathiara, Mali/Saini, Sweeper (those not included in SCs)/Halalkhor, Katuwa, Mahegeer, Dangi, Dhakar, Gada, Tantawa, Joria, Patwa/Patahara/Patehara/Deovanshi,Kalal/Kalwar/Kalar,Manihar/Kacher/Lakhara , Murao/Murai/Maurya, Momin (Ansar), Muslim Kayastha, Mirasi, Naddaf (Dhuniya)/Mansoori/Kandere/Kadere/Karan (Karn)	70
<b>TOTAL OBCs</b>			<b>79</b>

Source: UP Gazette Extraordinary, September 15, 2001.

had potential at that time. In spite of social and economic inequalities among various backward castes and subcastes, the post-Mandal horizontal mobilization of the backwards through the instrument of “quota politics” was a very significant development in UP as elsewhere that was to shape the political contours of society in the decades ahead.

The vertical mobilization of the backward community took both upward and downward direction. The upward mobilization of backwards meant that the OBCs moved up in the leadership structures of various political parties and also in the legislatures and parliament. That meant that there was competition among various political parties to attract the OBC politicians and put them in leadership positions. While Mulayam Singh Yadav was made Chief Minister of UP by the Janata Dal in 1989, a group of OBC leaders—Kalyan Singh, Vinay Katiyar, Uma Bharati—were brought to the forefront of the BJP; Kalyan Singh was even made the Chief Minister of UP in 1991. It was at this time that UP saw many other OBC leaders rise in leadership positions. Notable among them were Sone Lal Patel (Kurmi: Later formed Apna Dal), Beni Prasad Verma (Kurmi: Union Communications Minister in Prime Minister Deve Gowda's Ministry: 1996–8), Phoolan Devi, popularly known as Bandit Queen (Mallah: Elected to the Lok Sabha on SP ticket in 1996), Prem Lata Katiyar (Kurmi: BJP MLA), Manohar Lal and his son Deepak Kumar (Mallah: Unnao MP and also MLA SP), Ganga Charan Rajpur (Lodh 1989; JD/BJP, Hamirpur MP) and many others steadily became visible. The main point is that the rise of OBC leaders and their empowerment was not confined to any single political party; they rose in almost all the political parties. In spite of that, there was a cumulative mobilization and empowerment that gave a sense of an overall upward mobilization of OBCs.

The downward mobilization of OBCs was a direct consequence of the 73rd and 74th Amendment of the Constitution that gave constitutional status to the third tier of the federal structure, i.e., the Municipal and Panchayati Raj institutions. These Amendments provided for the reservation of OBCs in these grassroots institutions that ensured participation and representation of OBCs in them in proportion to their population in the local urban/rural areas but not exceeding 27 percent. Suddenly, several OBCs, both men and women, became active participants in the political deliberations in these bodies. Thus, even down the line, in urban and rural local bodies, a phenomenal OBC participation and consequent empowerment took place due to the 73rd and 74th Amendments.

### **Channels of mobilization**

The mobilization of backward castes since the 1960s was made possible using three channels (Verma 2005). The first channel was through the mobilization of peasants. The mobilization of the peasant class/castes acquired sharpness in UP in the wake of the decline of the Congress after the fourth general election in 1967, the rupture between Charan Singh and the Congress, and the formation of the BKD, to mainly protect the interests of the rich peasantry, particularly the Jats and Yadavs of western Uttar Pradesh, though it was projected as protecting the interests of the peasant class as such. When Charan Singh became the Prime Minister of the country in 1979, he presented a budget which mainly helped the big farmers. He

never offered anything to the marginal peasants and the landless; he never advocated a rigorous land ceiling and redistribution of land. While in his writings he made much of his concern for the farmers and rural poor, he does not even mention landless labourers in his writings, speeches or political programmes.

(Pai 1993)

Charan mainly supported the rich peasants—beneficiaries of the green revolution—from the middle and the backward cultivating castes. The middle and the backward castes had traditionally supported the opposition rather than the Congress. The BKD looked, initially, like a party spearheading a caste movement, but within a few years it took the shape of a class movement as it was able to unite some of the lower and middle peasantry (Pai 1993). Jats who were mainly concentrated in western UP and were considered land-owning dominant castes were not included in the OBCs list in UP. They were subsequently included in the state list. This was followed by the central government's decision in March 2014, to include Jats of not just UP but also of Bihar, Gujarat, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttarakhand and the National Capital Territory of Delhi benefiting about nine crores Jats. This decision was taken despite the rejection of the demand by the National Backward Class Commission. The consequence of this decision would result in further deterioration in the socio-economic status of the more-backward and most-backward castes as they would not be able to compete with the Jats who are, educationally and economically, miles ahead. In its drive to reap political harvest in some parts of country, including western UP, Congress appears to have taken a myopic decision to include dominant Jats in the OBC category.<sup>1</sup> Many suspect that the decision was politically motivated to keep Ajit Singh, the RLD leader who represented Jats in western UP in good humor. Ironically, Ajit's father and the influential Jat leader Charan Singh never approved the idea of Jats being socially and educationally backward and defended the Mandal report regarding their exclusion from the OBC category. Neither the Mandal Commission nor the National Commission for Backward Classes (NCBC) (1997) considered Jats eligible for OBC status. But the UP government included Jats among OBCs and placed them in more-backward category vide its gazette notification dated September 15, 2001. This step is bound to be a stumbling block in the homogenization of backward peasant castes all over UP.

The second channel of mobilization was the lower middle class of government servants. The mobilization of backwards through the efforts of the BAMCEF (1978) under the leadership of Kanshi Ram prepared adequate ground for the backward class movement. The BAMCEF spread its network steadily by holding meetings with the government servants to discuss and take a supportive stand on various issues affecting the members. The activities of the organization inculcated a sense of identity and confidence among backward class government employees (along with Dalits and minorities) all over the country. It was unfortunate that the BAMCEF took a Dalit trajectory failing to keep Dalits and OBCs together. However, it laid solid ground for the OBC movement to take firm root in UP.

The third channel for the mobilization of OBCs was political parties. First the Janata Dal, the Lok Dal and finally the SP mobilized the OBCs as the traditional hold of the Congress weakened. The space vacated by the Congress was open for competitive bidding. Three bidders appeared on the scene—the BSP, BJP and SP. The BSP wanted to have complete sway over the Bahujan Samaj but ended up consolidating its hold over the Dalits, especially the Chamars and the Jatavs. The lower Dalits called the “Ati-Dalits,” *viz.*, the Pasis, Bhangis, Balmikis, Dom, Khatiks, etc., could not be assimilated by the BSP; they were either with the BJP or the Congress.

The appearance of Mayawati completely changed the contours of political competition in the state, and Dalits came to have a cohesiveness and consolidation that was a new phenomenon. The coming together of Kanshi Ram and Mulayam Singh Yadav in the 1991 byelection in UP opened up the possibility of the coming together of Dalits and OBCs. In fact, the BSP and SP came together to form a coalition government in UP after the 1993 Assembly election, but the infamous “Circuit House incident” at Lucknow in 1995 in which a group of SP MLAs and their followers reportedly attacked BSP MLAs who were having a meeting with Mayawati as

Table 17.2 OBC Preference for BJP–SP

Party	OB Cs	1996	1996	1998	1999	2002	2004
		LS	Assembly	LS	LS	Assembly	LS
BJP	Yadav	9	6	9	10	5	4
	Non-Yadav OB Cs	38	46	46	35	28	30
SP	Yadav	74	60	76	77	71	73
	Non-Yadav OB Cs	29	19	18	20	17	23

Note: The figures represent OB Cs (Yadavs and non-Yadavs) party preference and are based on National Election Studies (NES) data of CSDS, Delhi. The figures are in percentages and rounded.

the relations between the two parties who were partners in the government, took a turn for the worse. This incident completely spoiled the chances of such a coming together of the Dalits and the OB Cs, and thus, the last chance of forming a “backward class constituency” in UP was lost.

The second democratic upsurge in 1989 had disillusioned the OB Cs from the Congress and the BJP, and they were looking for a third alternative. This was provided by the Janata Dal (JD). In UP, the JD formed its government under the leadership of Mulayam Singh Yadav in 1989. To counter the JD, the BJP tried to induct OB Cs in party positions and government. Even before the Mandal, sensing the mood for a change, BJP started giving importance to the OB Cs in the party and Kalyan Singh was made the Chief Minister over the claims of the upper castes. Several other important positions were also given to the OB Cs in the party. This is evidenced by the fact that since 1985, the number of OBC MLAs in the UP assembly kept rising from 5 in 1985, to 11 in 1989, to 40 in 1991 but in the next two elections it fell to 34 in 1993 and rose marginally to 36 in 1996 (Jeffery and Lerch 2003). However, it must also be remembered that this period saw the rise of the BJP in terms of electoral performance in the state assembly elections. Its position of a mere 15 MLAs in 1985 rose to 58 in 1989, to 221 in 1991, fell to 178 in 1993 and further fell to 174 in 1996. Interestingly, if we look at the social profile of BJP and the SP voters, we find that while Yadavs among OB Cs were mobilized heavily by the SP, the non-Yadav OB Cs were greatly swung in favor of the BJP (Table 17.2). Actually, the OB Cs were wooed by all parties in with party positions and there was an upsurge of OBC leaders at local levels in all parties. Thus, all the three categories of OB Cs, namely, peasants, government servants and the middle castes were mobilized, leading to the rise in collective consciousness of the OB Cs in the state of Uttar Pradesh.

### Model of mobilization

The model of mobilization of backward castes in UP differed from that of neighboring Bihar, on the one hand, and Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh (MP), on the other (Verma 2007). In Bihar, the mobilization came through homogenization of the “backward class” (which included OB Cs, Dalits and Muslims) over the issue of land reforms that were led by Swami Sahajanand Saraswati. In Rajasthan and MP, OB Cs were mobilized but in spite of their very huge population, their mobilization could take neither an independent class character nor a caste character, and they ended up being co-opted by the Congress and the BJP. We can place the UP model of mobilization between these two extremes of complete mobilization as a class (Bihar model) and

co-option (MP and Rajasthan model), considering that UP mobilization took various routes and used various channels for an independent and autonomous OBC mobilization.

In Bihar, OBC mobilization took a class character that included the OBCs, Dalits and Muslims. The movement gave them not only identity but also empowerment. Against that, in MP and Rajasthan, despite having 42 percent OBC population each, a backward caste movement did not take shape owing to the co-opting strategies of the two major political parties, Congress and BJP (Verma 2007a). UP however, in contrast to these two models, took an early lead in backward caste/class mobilization (Verma 2013) which led to substantial mobilization and empowerment of the backward community in UP (like Bihar). However, the movement did not take off along class lines and got stuck up at the level of castes (unlike Bihar). Unlike in Rajasthan and MP, backwards and Dalits in UP were able to convert social cleavages along caste lines and converted that into political structures—Dalits going to the BSP and OBCs to the SP.

The early efforts at backward mobilization had traces of a class mobilization under Dr Lohia and Chaudhary Charan Singh and even Kanshi Ram. But it was to lose its class character soon and acquire a caste character for the simple reason that Charan Singh genuinely espoused the interests of the lower and middle peasantry, and Kanshi Ram and Mulayam could set aside their differences and work for Dalit–OBC rapprochement. According to an interpretation (Pai 1993), peasant mobilization acquired sharpness in UP after the fourth general election in 1967 that showed a decline of Congress, rupture between Charan Singh and Congress and the formation of the BKD mainly to protect interests of rich peasantry, particularly Jats and Yadav of western UP. However, it was projected as protecting the interests of the peasant class and when Charan Singh became Prime Minister in 1979, he presented a “kulak budget” that helped only big farmers. Despite his concern for poor farmers in his writings, he never really did anything substantial to reduce their suffering.

## Mapping OBC leadership

When we map the pattern of leadership and its structure, two major scenarios emerge. One, the earlier leaders who strengthened backward class movement in UP did not work under the rubric of exclusionary politics nor resort to caste-based mobilization. The first 40 years of our democratic politics were not as casteist as compared to the post-Mandal era. OBC mobilization took place indirectly and under different covers but it was not dominated by caste politics. Three leaders Dr Ram Manohar Lohia, Charan Singh and Kanshi Ram were prominent leaders who either came from OBCs or espoused their cause. Caste-based OBC leadership came to the fore in 1989 with the formation of Janata Dal governments both at the centre and in UP, and the acceptance of Mandal Commission recommendations that accepted caste as a primary criterion for determining social backwardness. With Mulayam Singh Yadav taking the reins of the UP government in 1989, the caste character of OBC leadership and mobilized groups became more prominent. Since then, OBC mobilization and leadership continues to function within a caste framework.

Secondly, OBC leadership in UP was three-layered; the first layer consisted of leaders having national stature, the second layer consisted of leaders having state-level image, and the third layer consisted of constituency level or district level OBC leaders. In the first category came Dr Lohia, Charan Singh and Kanshi Ram who were known all over the country though their area of operation may not have been necessarily the whole of India. Lohia certainly had a pan-India mobilization framework, though Charan Singh and Kanshi Ram focused more on UP. In the second category were leaders like Mulayam Singh Yadav and Ajit Singh (son of Charan Singh) who had a restricted operational area within UP; while Mulayam was more active in Braj area, Ajit was trying to retain the legacy of his father in western UP districts, adjacent to the Braj area.

Neither of them could expand OBC mobilization to other areas of UP i.e., Poorvanchal (eastern districts of UP), Avadh (central UP), Terai belt (areas adjacent to Nepal), Bundelkhand (southern UP) or Ruhelkhand (northern UP) and Uttarakhand (that became the state of Uttarakhand in November 2000). Both Mulayam and Ajit ended up earning a name as caste leaders, Mulayam earning reputation as leader of Yadavs and Ajit of Jats. However, with the dawning of the coalition era at the center, both Mulayam and Ajit came to acquire national stature.

In the third category were such OBC leaders who were dominant in a district or a constituency and had hold over a particular subcaste among the OB Cs, but they were scattered in different parties. In this category come leaders from many OBC subcastes namely, *Kurmis* (Sone Lal Patel: Kannauj: Apna Dal, Beni Prasad Verma: Barabanki: SP/INC, Vinay Katiyar: BJP, Prem Lata Katiyar: BJP: Kanpur, Mathura Pal: Kanpur Dehat: BSP); *Mallahs* (Late Phoolan Devi: SP: Jalaun, Manohar Lal and Deepak Kumar: Unnao/Kanpur: SP); *Lodhs* (Kalyan Singh: BJP: Aligarh, Uma Bharati: BJP: Bundelkhand, Swami Brahmanand: Hamirpur: INC, Swami Prasad Singh: Hamirpur: INC, Ganga Charan Rajput: Hamirpur: JD); *Gaderis* (Raja Ram Pal : Kanpur Dehat: BSP/ INC), Babu Singh Kushwaha (most-backward: BSP), *Ahir/Yadavs* (Chandra Pal Yadav: Jhansi: SP, Vishambhar Singh Yadav: Baberu/Banda: SP).

### **Showcasing prominent OBC leaders**

Some of the more prominent OBC leaders among them were Lodh leader Kalyan Singh with his pocket of influence around Bulandshahar, which is the epicenter of what is termed as the Lodh heartland of Uttar Pradesh. This area spreads across 11 Lok Sabha seats in Aligarh (Kalyan Singh's home district), Agra, Ferozabad and Farrukhababad districts. The Lodhs form only around 2 percent of the total population of UP but they have a huge concentration in this region. Lodhs constitute 10 to 35 percent of the voters in these parliamentary constituencies. Kalyan Singh left the BJP when he felt marginalized and formed his own party; for some time he hobnobbed with Mulayam Singh Yadav and SP, but Mulayam's gamble cost him Muslim votes and hence Mulayam had to show him the door. He was grabbed by BJP and has since been with the party. Along with Kalyan, his lieutenant, Sachchidanand Hari Sakshi Maharaj also emerged as a Lodh leader getting elected to the Lok Sabha three times from Farrukhababad. He later joined the SP and was elected to the Rajya Sabha, but he was expelled by the House for misuse of the Member of Parliament Local Area Development (MPLAD) scheme under which every MP gets a specified amount of funds annually for taking up developmental programs in their constituency.

Another much talked about OBC leader was Phoolan Devi, popularly known as Bandit Queen. She was brought to parliament by Mulayam Singh, her mentor in politics. She represented Mirzapur. She was so obliged to him that when Rajnath Singh as UP CM tried to give MBCs a separate quota within the OBC quota through the Hukum Singh Committee Recommendations that would have benefited her own community of Mallahs, she opposed it in deference to the wishes of Mulayam Singh Yadav. That was a retrogressive move because in many states like Karnataka, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, the system of reservation within a reservation is already in place to give advantage of reservation to the more marginalized among OBCs. The MBCs constitute about 7 percent of the OBC population and any sub-quota to them would have certainly strengthened them both economically and politically.

Dr Sone Lal Patel was another popular Kurmi leader with influence around Kanpur and Kannauj, and minor presence in eastern UP. Initially, he worked with Kanshi Ram to mobilize Dalits and backwards. He was one of the founder members of Bahujan Samaj Party. But he developed differences with Mayawati and formed his own party, Apna Dal, in 1995. He died in October 2009 in a car accident. The Kurmis became disenchanted with Apna Dal after his wife

Ms Krishna Patel became the president of the party and his daughter Anupriya Patel, General Secretary and could not keep the party together. Many Kurmis have since moved to the BJP. Apna Dal came into disrepute for giving ticket to mafia don Atiq Ahmad from Phulpur. This constituency where the Kurmis (Patel) have a massive presence, elected Kurmi candidates six times between 1980 and 1999 to the legislative assembly.

Beni Prasad Verma, presently Union Cabinet Minister (Steel), had a long innings in the politics of UP. He was first elected to the UP assembly in 1974 as a member of Charan Singh's BKD (Bharatiya Kranti Dal). He kept changing party but kept the socialist line that took him to Lok Dal, Janata Dal and the Samajwadi Party of Mulayam Singh. But he finally quit the SP to join Congress just before the 2009 Lok Sabha elections. Beni Prasad Verma served as the Union Communications Minister in Deve Gowda's cabinet from 1996–8. He was re-elected to the Lok Sabha in 1998, 1999 and 2004 from the same constituency. In 2009, he was re-elected to the Lok Sabha from Gonda. Verma's pocket of influence is the eastern districts of UP *viz.*, Gonda, Bahraich, Barabanki, Basti and Shrawasti, etc.

Another such Yadav leader was Chaudhary Harmohan Yadav (Kanpur), two-time Rajya Sabha MP, who had close family connection with Mulayam Singh Yadav. Harmohan Yadav began his political career in 1952 when he was elected village "pradhan" of Gujjaini village. He also became corporator in Kanpur Nagar Nigam in the year 1959. In 1970, he became a member of Uttar Pradesh Vidhan Parishad and continued till 1982. He had been Chairman of the All-India Yadav Mahasabha for three consecutive terms (1992–5) and later designated as guardian of that organization. For his role in protecting Sikhs during riots in 1984, he was awarded "Shaurya Chakra."

### **Drawbacks in OBC mobilization**

In spite of a very rich OBC leadership throughout UP and also a very substantial mobilization of backwards, the state failed to move towards a robust backward movement. The mobilization lacked homogenization of OBCs; lack of homogenization resulted in non-transition of the mobilization into a strong OBC movement; failure to make it a movement meant that there was no unidirectional and singular channelization of the generated social energy into a single political structure or political party. The result was that in spite of a very favorable environment for strong backward movement, it became fragmented and subsumed in several political formations.

The OBC mobilization suffered, at least, from three drawbacks. One, it failed to take a class orientation and got stuck on the threshold of caste. The major break came between Dalits and OBCs and the egocentric politics of the leaders of the two major denominations prevented the class orientation of mobilization. Two, the backward caste mobilization did not even succeed in keeping the mobilization at the caste level; they allowed petty subcaste interests to dominate the metanarrative of backward caste movement. It became more important to be Yadav or Kurmi or Koeri or Lodh or Mallah, and so on; there was no leadership among the backwards that could prevent this fragmenting tendency. Three, the mobilization was largely confined to the western part of the state extending up to central UP; it could not acquire pan-UP magnitude and remained confined to a limited geographical pocket in western UP and the Braj area.

### **Profile OBCs in UP**

Uttar Pradesh is the most populous state in India having a population of over 20 crores. The OBC population in UP is massive. However, the exact share of the OBCs in the population of UP or India is not known. There are differing and conflicting estimates of OBC population percentage given by various agencies like the Backward Class Commission (Mandal Commission),

Table 17.3 Caste Profile of Uttar Pradesh

Caste hierarchy	Castes with percentage/numbers		
Upper castes (19.0 percent)	Brahmin (8.5 percent)	Thakur (7.5 percent)	Vaishya (2 percent), Kayastha (1 percent)
Middle castes (41.13 percent: NSSO) (54.05 percent: Hukum Singh Committee, 2001)	Backwards (BCs – 01) Yadavs	More-Backwards (MRBCs – 08) Sonar, Kurmi, Lodh	Most-Backwards (MBCs – 70) Shakya, Kashyap, Kewat, Gaderia, etc.
OBCs – 79			
Lower Castes (21.7 percent) SCs – 66	Dalits Chamars (01)	Ati-Dalits Pasi, Balmiki, Dom, etc. (65 percent)	
Muslims (18.5 percent)	Ashraf From noble descent/ upper-caste converts	Ajlaf Backward Muslims	Arjal Dalit Muslims

Source: Lower Castes (SCs) and Muslims: Census 2001, Middle Caste: NSSO 41 percent, Hukum Singh Committee, UP 2001: 54.05 percent, upper castes figures are rough estimates.

National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) or the Hukum Singh Committee (Government of UP 2001). The caste census in India was last done in 1931 and, hence, we do not have the caste profile, except Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, of UP or any other state or India.

In Table 17.3, we have given the probable caste profile of UP. Broadly, society is divided into upper castes, middle castes (OBCs) and the lower castes (SCs) and the Muslims. In UP, the population share of upper castes is approximately 19 percent, middle castes (OBCs) 41.13 percent (as per NSSO), lower castes (SCs) 21.7 percent and Muslims 18.5 percent. The population shares of only SCs and Muslims are as per the census data, the rest are just estimates. However, that shows that among all four major meta-classification categories, OBC population share is the highest. That makes OBC claim to power formidable. But that also points to the necessity of OBC homogenization which has never been on the agenda of those leading the OBC movement in UP. That is the biggest hurdle in OBC mobilization and empowerment in UP.

While the NSSO puts OBC figures in India at 41.13 percent of the population, the Mandal Commission in its report suggested very high population figure of 52 percent. In UP, the Hukum Singh Committee (2001) constituted by the Rajnath Government to provide a quota within a quota for various marginalized castes/groups within the OBCs, in its report gave an even higher estimate of OBC population in UP putting it at 54.05 percent in 2001 as against 41.13 per cent in 1991 signaling a rise of about 12.92 percent in a decade (1991–2001). No one is sure about the real share of the OBCs in the overall population, be it national population or the state population. At best, all estimates are just guesswork. However, there cannot be any doubt that the OBC population in UP is numerically large (Table 17.4).

### Backward caste politics in UP

There was nothing like backward politics in UP until Mandal arrived, though the backward mobilization had been going on for quite some time since Dr Lohia and Charan Singh. As

Table 17.4 Population Estimates of OBCs

S. No.	Document/agency	OBC population (in percent)	Remarks
1	National Sample Survey Organisation 61s Round (2004–5)	41.13	National share
2	Mandal Commission	52.00	National share
3	Hukum Singh Committee Report (UP)	54.05	State share

pointed out earlier, backward mobilization could neither take off as a backward movement nor as backward politics. The backwards were usually subsumed either in the Congress or in the BJP or its earlier variant, Jana Sangh. But restlessness among backwards steadily grew in the wake of green revolution that gave them agricultural prosperity owing to modernization of agriculture, hybrid seeds, fertilizers and pesticides, etc., and also the yellow revolution that doubled oil production in a decade since 1987. The economic prosperity of OBCs, as a land-owning agrarian class, propelled their political ambitions. With the existing political parties lacking in inner party democracy, the backward leaders at the grassroots level, in spite of massive popular support, could not make it up to leadership positions in them although its upper class/upper caste leadership claimed to be representative of the entire society (Yadav and Palshikar 2003). That inculcated in them a sense of frustration and they were looking for an opening that was amply provided by the Mandal movement.

The coming into play of an autonomous backward politics in UP was prefaced with the formation of a political outfit called Janata Dal (JD) that came into existence through the merger of Janata Party factions, the Lok Dal, Congress(S), and the Jan Morcha led by V. P. Singh, on October 11, 1988, on the birth anniversary of Jayaprakash Narayan. The Lok Dal, which was the dominant faction, had already made inroads into farmers, many of whom were from backward caste/class. In 1989, the JD formed governments both at the center and in UP. Soon after that, V. P. Singh as Prime Minister of India, accepted the Mandal Commission recommendations that not only greatly fired the imagination of the backwards for empowerment, but also gave them historic opportunity to say goodbye to both Congress and BJP and make an exodus to the JD. That is the starting point of how the JD got massive support of the backwards in UP. That support continues to date with some dilution, and the beneficiary is the SP, the most prominent successor of JD lineage, that came into existence in October 1992. Since then, the politics of SP has been prominently looked at as the politics of OBCs. Hence, we shall focus on the politics of the SP to primarily get a sense of the OBC politics in UP especially since the political innings of Mulayam Singh Yadav is coterminous with backward politics in UP.

### Mulayam Singh Yadav and the Samajwadi Party

Mulayam Singh Yadav first got elected to the UP legislative assembly in 1967 as a Samyukta Socialist Party (SSP) candidate. His arrival synchronized with the beginning of anti-Congressism when Congress lost power in several states (Bihar, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Orissa, Punjab, Rajasthan, UP, West Bengal) in February 1967. Mulayam joined the Charan Singh-led Bharatiya Kranti Dal (BKD) after the death of Lohia in 1968. With their coming together, hopes were raised that the more prosperous Jats peasants of western UP and the more numerous but poor “farmers” of eastern UP would constitute a common political platform. But the

Mandal report drew a wedge between the two; the Jats were obviously not classified as OBCs then and, hence, the *kisan* (farmers) movement under BKD got divided between Jats vs non-Jats or Jats vs OBCs (Verma 2004). Soon after the death of Charan Singh (1987), his party (BKD/ BLD/LD) could not sustain this divide and split two factions—the Jats-dominant LD (A) led by his son Ajit Singh, and non-Jat dominant LD (B) led by Mulayam Singh, the political heir of Charan Singh. Notwithstanding the inclusion of Jats in the state OBC list in 2001 and the central OBC list for UP recently (2014), the damage was done to the OBC movement and politics in UP.

Before the 1989 elections, Mulayam Singh's LD (B) had merged with the JD. The JD stunned everyone by its performance in both the LS and the assembly elections in UP (LS: 54/85 seats, 35.9 percent votes; Assembly: 208/425 seats, 29.71 percent votes). It looked as if peasants and backward classes were coming together. Some opine that it represented the coming together of the rich and the middle peasantry in the medium and semi-medium land size holding areas due to the green revolution (Pai 1993). But this view is challenged on the ground that in less than 18 months, when Lok Sabha and Assembly elections were again held in 1991, JD faced disintegration and decimation and was reduced to petty numbers in UP (LS: 22 seats, 21.6 per votes, Assembly: 92 seats, 18.8 percent votes) (Verma 2003).

The OBC politics were pursued by SP and its leader Mulayam Singh Yadav on the twin planks of exclusionary politics fueled by Mandal, and the issue of secularism that was handed over to them by Rajiv Gandhi when he tried to satisfy communal elements both among the Hindus and Muslims that in turn produced polarization, which was exploited effectively by the BJP on the one hand, and Janata Dal on the other, projecting itself as a party that cared for minorities (Verma 2004, p. 1510). It is this social coalition of backwards, mainly the upper OBCs Yadavs and Muslims that shaped future OBC politics as practiced by the SP in UP. And, more importantly, that social coalition gave the SP a social base of roughly 20–25 percent in state politics.

Let us examine how the Samajwadi Party (SP) performed in electoral politics in UP since beginning (Table 17.5). For the first time, the SP as an independent party fought UP assembly elections in 1993. It is almost two decades since then. If we analyze the electoral performance of the party, we find that the party has registered a steady and rising electoral graph in terms of both seats and vote share since its inception (seats: 1993–109, 1996–110, 2002–143, 2007–97, 2012–224; vote share: 1993–17.82 percent, 1996–21.8 percent, 2002–25.41 percent, 2007–25.43 percent, 2012–29.15 percent). The only exception was 2007 in which the seats went down even though there was a marginal increase in the vote share. This may be a positive and rosy picture for the party, but on a careful analysis, it appears that the party does not stand on solid ground. When we analyze the electoral performance of the SP in Lok Sabha (LS) elections, we find that the party first fought the LS polls in 1996 winning 16 seats and 20.8 percent vote share. In this segment also, the SP showed replication of the assembly model till 2004 LS polls, but during the 2009 elections, the party suffered both in terms of seats and votes (seats: 1996–16, 1998–20, 1999–26, 2004–35, 2009–23; vote share: 1996–20.8 percent, 1998–28.7 percent, 1999–24.6 percent, 2004–26.6 percent, 2009–23.3 percent) (Table 17.5).

The important thing to note is that in both the assembly and the LS elections, the downslide had already started. And the most important reason for that is not so much the non-performance of the government on the development front, but its inability to enforce the rule of law and growing sense of insecurity among people. This charge is so routinely applied to the SP government every time it comes to power that many hooligans and criminal elements have started using the party banner, flags, pictures of Mulayam or Akhilesh, on their vehicles as a passport for unlawful and criminal activities in society.

Table 17.5 Electoral Performance of the Samajwadi Party (SP) in UP (1980–2014)

Party name of SP	Year	Lok Sabha		Assembly	
		Seats	Vote share (percent)	Seats	Vote share (percent)
Lok Dal (LD)	1980	29	28.9	59	21.5
Lok Dal (LD)	1984	2	21.4	—	—
Lok Dal (LD)	1985	—	—	84	21.43
Janata Dal (JD)	1989	54	35.9	208	29.71
Samajwadi Janata Party (SJP)	1991	4	10.1	34	12.52
Samajwadi Party (SP)	1993	—	—	109	17.82
Samajwadi Party (SP)	1996	16	20.8	110	21.8
Samajwadi Party (SP)	1998	20	28.7	—	—
Samajwadi Party (SP)	1999	26	24.06	—	—
Samajwadi Party (SP)	2002	—	—	143	25.41
Samajwadi Party (SP)	2004	35	26.6	—	—
Samajwadi Party (SP)	2007	—	—	97	25.43
Samajwadi Party (SP)	2009	23	23.3	—	—
Samajwadi Party (SP)	2012	—	—	224	29.15
Samajwadi Party (SP)	2014	5	22.2	—	—

Source: CSDS Data Unit and ECI Statistical Reports.

In spite of the party claiming to be guided by the socialist philosophy of Dr Ram Manohar Lohia, the people are dismayed to see neither any element of Lohia nor socialism left in the party. The secular credentials of the party were much discredited owing to its open support to criminal components that represent it in the LS and UP assembly, and also because of the blatant favoritism it accords to Muslims on the pretext of being their saviors.

Though the SP formed government in UP with an absolute majority after the 2012 assembly elections, the vote share of the party was very low (29.15 percent); 1 percent lower than that of the Mayawati (BSP) government in 2007 (30.4 percent), and the lowest vote share since independence on which any state government had ever been formed in UP. The party has also not been doing well throughout all the subregions of the state. However, east UP, including the north-east parts of UP, Avadh and Ruhelkhand regions, has really become a strong bastion of the SP. Even in the Bundelkhand region, the party has developed a popular base of about 25 percent (Tables 17.6 and 17.7). While from outside, one may be inclined to give credit to the OBC mobilization for the steady electoral successes of the SP, the fact is that OBC consolidation and homogenization remains an unattended area in the SP despite party's claims to pursue inclusive politics.

### Social base of the Samajwadi Party

Notwithstanding the formation of government led by Mulayam Singh Yadav three times (December 5, 1989–June 24, 1991; December 4, 1993–June 3, 1995; August 29, 2003–May 13, 2007), and also the formation of an absolute majority government led by his son Akhilesh Yadav in 2012, the social profile of Samajwadi Party (SP) voters does not look impressive. And that is confirmed by the fact that notwithstanding the absolute majority government formed

Table 17.6 Region-wise Performance of the SP in Lok Sabha and Assembly Elections (1989–2004)

Year/ Region	LS/Assembly seats	1989		1991		1993		1996		1998		1999		2002		2004	
		JD	JNP	SP	SP	SP	SP	SP	SP	SP	SP	SP	SP	SP	SP	SP	
WUP	LS (13)	12(54.5)	0(9.72)	—	1(18.40)	0(22.73)	1(13.96)	—	—	2(10.8)	—	—	—	—	—	—	
	Assembly (65)	47(42.28)	2(5.97)	5(8.67)	10(14.14)	—	—	—	—	7(20.8)	—	—	—	—	—	—	
Ruhelkhand	LS (10)	6(35.19)	0(2.58)	—	4(25.46)	4(32.62)	3(23.73)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	4(23.8)	
	Assembly (50)	21(27.60)	3(11.80)	16(22.62)	15(23.83)	—	—	—	—	22(25.6)	—	—	—	—	—	—	
Doab	LS (14)	11(43.77)	1(12.08)	—	3(20.89)	5(33.69)	8(30.44)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	9(35.0)	
	Assembly (70)	47(36.28)	2(20.23)	25(25.32)	22(28.19)	—	—	—	—	27(23.1)	—	—	—	—	—	—	
Bundelkhand	LS (4)	2(18.78)	2(18.0)	—	0(17.27)	0(27.72)	0(24.13)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	3(32.2)	
	Assembly (20)	5(13.18)	0(8.94)	1(3.68)	3(16.71)	—	—	—	—	4(23.1)	—	—	—	—	—	—	
Avadh	LS (21)	10(28.9)	0(7.83)	—	3(22.15)	7(30.77)	8(24.9)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	4(26.1)	
	Assembly (105)	4(22.98)	10(15.85)	41(27.20)	35(25.52)	—	—	—	—	29(28.17)	—	—	—	—	—	—	
Poorvanchal	LS (19)	11(3.099)	1(9.74)	—	5(21.38)	4(29.03)	6(28.59)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	13(28.25)	
	Assembly (95)	52(27.71)	7(11.56)	20(12.89)	25(22.03)	—	—	—	—	57(26.7)	—	—	—	—	—	—	

Source: Compiled by the author using Election Commission of India data.

Table 17.7 Region-wise Performance of the SP in LS and Assembly Elections (2007–14)

Year/ Region	LS seats Assembly seats	2007	2009	2012	2014
WUP	LS (08)	—	1(18.5)	—	0(17.8)
	Assembly 42)	2(16.8)	-----	10(20.5)	
Ruhelkhand	LS (10)	—	3(21.9)	—	1 (31.4)
	Assembly (50)	13(25.2)	—	41(29.4)	
Doab	LS (15)	—	6(26.1)	—	3 (25.2)
	Assembly (75)	17(24.3)	—	17(24.3)	
Bundelkhand	LS (04)	—	2(27.4)	—	0 (22.1)
	Assembly (21)	4(26.1)	—	5(25.3)	
Avadh	LS (14)	—	2(20.3)	—	0 (15.9)
	Assembly (74)	23(28.2)	—	55(32.9)	
East UP	LS (16)	—	8(30.4)	—	1 (21.4)
	Assembly (79)	17(27.8)	—	52(32.4)	
North-East UP	LS (13)	—	1(17.4)	—	0 (23.0)
	Assembly (61)	21(25.6)	—	32(28.1)	

Source: Compiled by the author using Election Commission of India data. This seven-fold subregional division is now used by Centre for the Study of Developing Societies discarding the earlier six-fold subregional division.

Table 17.8 SP Vote Share in Lok Sabha Elections (2004–9)

Caste	2004 LS elections SP vote percent	2009 LS elections SP vote percent	Gains/loss (+/-)
Brahmin	11	5	-6
Thakur	19	12	-7
Other Upper Caste	9	8	-1
Yadav	73	73	0
Kurmi	23	18	-5
Jatsavs	11	5	-6
Muslims	47	30	-17

Source: Compiled by author using National Election Studies (NES) survey data 2004 and 2009.

by Akhilesh Yadav, it is also the first government in UP to have been formed on a vote share of 29 percent. So, what looks like a robust OBC mobilization and movement from a distance is actually based on a very fragile social foundation.

Tables 17.8, 17.9 and 17.10 show the changing social profile of the SP in Uttar Pradesh. Table 17.8 gives us the vote share of SP in various caste communities in two LS elections (2004–9), Table 17.9 gives us the same for assembly elections (2007–12) and Table 17.10 reflects the changes in the voters' preference for the SP between parliamentary and assembly elections (2009–12). We find that the party was in bad shape during the 2004–9 LS elections because it recorded losses in all social denominations except Yadavs. The greatest shock to the SP was in the

Table 17.9 SP Vote Share in Assembly Elections (2007–12).

Castes	Assembly elections 2007		Assembly elections 2012	
	SP vote share	Gain/loss over 2002	SP vote share	Gain/loss over 2007
Brahmin	10	+7	19	+9
Thakur	21	+12	26	+5
Vaish	12	-5	12	00
Other upper caste	17	+3	15	-2
Jats	11	+6	7	-4
Yadav	73	+1	66	-7
Kurmi	21	+12	35	+14
MBCs	20	-2	26	+6
Jatsavs	3	+1	15	+12
Other SCs	13	-2	19	+6
Muslims	47	-7	39	-8

Source: A. K. Verma. Based on CSDS Survey data, UP Assembly Election Studies 2007 and 2012.

Table 17.10 SP Gains during 2009–12.

CASTE	2009 LS elections	2012 assembly elections	Gain/loss
	SP vote percent	SP vote percent	
Brahmin	5	19	+14
Thakur	12	26	+14
Other Upper Caste	8	15	+7
Yadav	73	66	-7
Kurmi	18	35	+17
Jatsavs	5	15	+10
Other SCs	10	19	+9
Muslims	30	39	+9

Source: Compiled by author from CSDS Survey data, UP Assembly Election Studies 2012 and

National Election Studies (NES) 2009.

Muslim segment about which the party boasted of massive support. The Muslim support for the SP was reduced by a massive 17 percentage points in the 2009 LS polls (Table 17.8).

But then, things seem to be brightening up for the SP thereafter. The party made an impressive performance in the 2012 assembly elections. When we compare the social profile of the SP between 2007 and 2012 assembly polls, we find that the party improved its image significantly by recording accretions in vote share in several caste groups *viz.*, Brahmins (+9), Thakurs (+5), kurmis (+14), most backwards (+6) and even Dalits (Jatsavs: +12, lower SCs: +6), though it still lost votes among Yadavs (-7), Jats (-4), and Muslims (-8) (Table 17.9).

But the most impressive improvement in the social profile of the party could be seen between 2009 and 2012. When we look at the difference in the percentage vote share of the SP during that period, we notice that except among Yadavs (-7), the party recorded accretions in vote share

in almost all social denominations (Brahmins +14, Thakurs +14, other upper castes +7, kurmis +17, Jatsavs +10, lower SCs +9, Muslims +9) (Table 17.10). That explains why the SP got an absolute majority in the 2012 assembly elections in UP.

However, in the 2014 LS elections, the party registered a decline in support in all social denominations. Only Muslim support was up by 28 percentage points (2014, p. 58 and 2012, p. 30). The most surprising decline was in the Yadav support base: Yadavs are the core constituency of the SP. Even their support declined by 20 percentage points (2014, p. 73 and 2009, p. 53) (Verma 2014). That was in spite of the initial anger of Muslims with the SP in the wake of the Muzzaffarnagar riots and its mishandling by the Akhilesh Yadav government.

### **Samajwadi Party's huge loss in 2014 Lok Sabha elections**

The 2014 LS elections brought crushing defeat to SP in UP. The party contested 78 out of 80 seats leaving Rae Bareily and Amethi for Congress President Sonia Gandhi and Vice President Rahul Gandhi respectively as a matter of courtesy to the Gandhis. Out of 78, the party could win only five seats, and all went to the Mulayam family: Mulayam contested two LS seats—Azamgarh and Mainpuri—and won both, his daughter-in-law retained her Kannauj seat, and nephews Dharmendra Yadav and Akshay Yadav won Badayun and Ferozabad respectively. Mulayam later vacated the Mainpuri seat for his grand-nephew Tej Pratap Yadav who later got elected as SP candidate in a byelection.

Compared to the 2009 LS elections, though the party lost 18 LS seats, fortunately for the party, its vote share was remained intact (2014: 22.2 percent, 2009: 23.3 percent). But, when compared to the 2012 assembly elections, its vote share was down by seven percentage points. However, the regional performance of SP was interesting. Though the SP lost seats in all sub-regions, its vote share tells a different story. Regional analysis of its vote share indicates that it lost voters' support only in three subregions (Avadh, Bundelkhand and east-UP); its vote share remained almost unchanged in Doab and west-UP, whereas the SP actually gained votes in north-east UP (2014: 23 percent, 2009: 17.2 percent) and Ruhelkhand (2014: 31.4 percent, 2009: 24.7 percent). Thus, in north-east UP, the SP gained 5.8 percent more votes compared to 2009 and in Ruhelkhand, its gain was 6.7 percent. The regional spread of SP votes indicates that it did badly not because of any serious erosion in its support base but because the BJP very substantially raised its vote share (Verma 2014).

### **New OBC discourse in UP**

The 2014 LS elections will be long remembered not only for the landslide victory of the BJP in UP winning 71 out of 78 seats that it contested (two seats were contested and won by its ally Apna Dal), but for a new OBC discourse through the intervention of the BJP's prime ministerial candidate Narendra Modi. Before the 2014 LS elections, Mulayam Singh Yadav and his Samajwadi Party had almost monopolized OBC discourse in UP. But, as the election campaign unfolded, Modi's caste came to be discovered accidentally when Congress's Mani Shankar Aiyar referred to his *Chaiwala* background in bad taste and caused people to dig out Modi's caste that turned out to be Teli which was categorized as OBC in Gujarat. Hence, when Modi came to UP for campaigning and chose to contest from Varanasi in UP, the OBCs were not only impressed by his promise of development, but, somewhere in their hearts, they connected with his OBC background. That is why 27 percent Yadavs, 53 percent Kurmis and 60 percent other OBCs voted for Modi.

That points to a very interesting development in backward castes. The monopoly of Mulayam and the Samajwadi Party over OBCs appears to be broken and now there are two claimants for

OB C votes; Mulayam and Modi. In the days to come, Modi may succeed in bringing a substantial section of Yadavs and non-Yadav OB Cs to the BJP. The recent visit of Prime Minister Modi to Mulayam's village, Saifai, during a marriage ceremony was a pointer: The Yadav bastion, including Mulayam's family members, went crazy for Modi. He already seemed to have substantially altered the OB C discourse in UP.

To sum up, we may say that OB Cs are a formidable social denomination in UP but are badly fragmented in upper backwards, more backwards and most backwards. Due to that, despite some mobilization, there is no strong OB C movement in the state preventing robust OB C politics in UP. The empowerment of OB Cs through quota politics is a reality now reflecting in the OB C population though the unfortunate part is that the better ones among the OB Cs are not prepared to leave the quota benefits for those among OB Cs who are far less developed. So, OB C homogenization is not only being prevented through the institution of subcastes but also through differentiated economic status among them. That is a major stumbling block in the development of strong OB C politics in the state allowing the lower OB Cs to be subsumed by different non-OB C parties. In one sense, that may be looked on as a recent development in Indian politics that appears to be relegating "caste politics" to the background allowing "class politics" to come to the fore. If that succeeds, the initial objective of Dr Lohia, Charan Singh and Kanshi Ram for a backward class movement and politics may take shape in UP and India though Modi's arrival on the scene may further reduce that possibility.

### **Decline of OB C politics and the Samajwadi Party since 2014**

The Samajwadi Party claiming to largely represent the OB Cs in UP had seen a substantial downslide since the 2014 LS elections. The party lost badly in the 2014 LS polls winning a mere five out of 80 LS seats, and repeated the same performance in the 2019 LS polls. In the intervening assembly elections 2017, the SP government was badly defeated and lost power to the BJP. The BJP won about 89 percent of seats (71/80 seats) (Verma 2016).

The party not only lost power in 2017, but if we gauge the downslide of the party, we find some very interesting developments. One, the SP has been losing its OB C base; two, many among the OB Cs, especially the more-backwards and the most-backwards and some Yadavs not connected to the Saifai group, had been attracted to the BJP; and three, the most important OB C family represented by Mulayam Singh Yadav, Ram Gopal Yadav, Shiv Pal Yadav, Akhilesh Yadav and his wife Dimple Yadav had suffered division over the issue of leadership in the SP. After the 2014 shock, the core OB C Yadav family saw an unusual war where Akhilesh Yadav, then Chief Minister of UP tried to wriggle out of the collective umbrella of the leadership of his father and uncles and assert his independence. In this, his father played a dubious role in which he pretended that he was with his brother Shivpal Yadav but actually he ensured the smooth crowning of his son Akhilesh Yadav. Mulayam had thrust Akhilesh on UP very suddenly to the discomfiture of his uncle Shivpal. Since then, division in the party was only a matter of time. That happened in December 2016 (Verma 2016).

### **New OB C Experiment**

The shock defeat of SP in UP in 2014 completely bewildered and derailed the OB C politics. The young C. M. Akhilesh's three political experiments turned out to be catastrophic for OB C-centric politics. One, he took control of the party leadership by ousting the elders that included his father Mulayam Singh Yadav and uncle Shiv Pal Yadav among others. It was also done in such a crude manner and that too just before the 2017 assembly elections that it greatly confused

the traditional supporters of the party and ultimately led to a vertical split in the party. That adversely affected the fortune of the OBC politics in UP.

Secondly, to make up for the loss of his traditional supporters, Akhilesh had no pragmatic and grassroots strategy. So, he entered into a pre-poll alliance with the Congress Party in UP in assembly polls in 2017. He boasted of getting 300 seats owing to “gathbandhan” with Congress and media greatly hyped the coming together of the two “young lads of UP”—Akhilesh Yadav and Rahul Gandhi. However, seasoned analysts believed that the “gathbandhan” was devoid of chemistry between the two parties at grassroots level and that neither Akhilesh nor Rahul had the ability to transfer their party votes to each other (Verma 2017). The fear came true, and the SP did very poorly in the assembly polls in 2017.

Third, in the 2019 LS elections, Akhilesh committed another political blunder by going for yet another experiment and entered into a pre-poll alliance of sharing of seats with the BSP’s supremo Mayawati. Contrary to popular belief that the SP-BSP combine would sweep the elections, our field studies clearly indicated that Modi had changed the OBC narrative at the grassroots level not only because he himself belongs to the OBC caste category, but because of his smart strategy of an inclusive approach towards the OBCs. He allotted tickets to the OBCs in proportion to their projected or estimated population in UP. In doing that, he gave weightage to the lower and middle OBCs and did not exclude even Yadavs. On the other hand, by contesting only half the seats, both the SP and BSP guillotined half their leadership and virtually ended their political careers. At the constituency level, that not only led to revolts in both the parties, but they also failed to transfer their votes to each other. The result was that Akhilesh Yadav and his OBC politics went into reverse gear and managed to win barely the same number of seats it won in the 2014 elections.

So, during the past few years (2012–20), OBC politics in UP has gone completely haywire. The leadership of Akhilesh has not consolidated the votebank of the SP. The OBCs have dispersed and scattered and the lower OBCs have generally shifted to the BJP. The leadership does not seem to be contemplating any popular and positive plans to undo its mistakes and win over the lost constituency. That is unfortunate for the OBC-centric party because the OBC population comprises half the population of the state. The day OBC leadership matures and adopts twin strategies of homogenization of the OBC community and inclusive politics, a new chapter may be written in OBC politics in UP.

## Note

- 1 The requests of Jats for inclusion in the Central List of OBCs for the states of Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Bharatpur and Dhaulpur districts of Rajasthan was earlier rejected by National Commission for Backward Classes in 1997. The National Commission for Backward Classes (NCBC) under the NCBC (Power to Review Advice) Rules 2011, decided to consider requests for inclusion of the Jats community after collecting additional socio-economic data through the Indian Council for Social Science Research (ICSSR), in addition to data from the Social Economic Caste Census (SECC). A Group of Ministers was constituted on August 20, 2013, to (i) engage with the representatives of the Jats community periodically; and (ii) apprise itself of the progress of the survey being conducted by NCBC through ICSSR in six states.

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# UNDERSTANDING BACKWARD CASTE MOVEMENT IN CONTEMPORARY BIHAR

*Sanjay Kumar*

## Origin of the backward caste movement

The process of Sanskritization was not confined to the Hindi belt, it was also a reality of South India. In Bihar, Sanskritization has been the dominant form of social change among the backward castes. Here, the important question is why there was an absence of the same kind of anti-Brahmin movement in the Hindi belt in general and in Bihar in particular, even if we find a similar kind of social and economic exploitation of the backward castes in these regions? According to Jaffrelot:

In south and west India, caste associations marked the first stage of a much larger ethnicization. They have not only promoted caste fusion, their discourse on autochthony and the Buddhist origin of the lower castes endowed them with a prestigious identity. In north India, none of these processes reached their logical conclusion, even though the British policies of positive discrimination had created the same context as in the south and in the west.

(Jaffrelot 2010, p. 454)

Here, the argument put forward by Jaffrelot, in the context of the “Aryanization” of Yadavs, is that the ethnicization of lower castes could not take place in the Hindi belt and the identity formation of backward castes was taking place following the logic of Sankritization because of the campaign of Arya Samaj which was especially successful in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. The important point which has been missed by Jaffrelot is that the Sanskritization or “Aryanization” was not a smooth process for Yadavs in Bihar. H. C. Prior in an Annual Report of Bihar and Orissa (1922) gives an account of the assertion of Yadavs in Bihar:

In Patna district there had been for some time friction developing between the *Gwalas* (Yadavs) and other Hindus. The *Gwalas* asserted their rights to wear sacred threads, refused to do any *begari*, to sell their produce at privileged rates or to allow their women folk to go to bazaars to sell milk. The first claim was strongly resented by all the other classes of Hindus, while the *landlords* strongly objected to the refusal of *begari* and of privileged rates. An anti-Gwala movement was therefore launched. The object of this

movement was purely retaliatory, and in pursuance of its objects, Gwalas who refused to sell milk in the bazaar were to be deprived of the services of barbers, washerman and mid-wives, and were not to be allowed to graze their cattle on the zamindars' waste-lands. The opposition only served to make the Gwalas more determined than ever. Feelings between the two parties began to run high, and in latter part in November, when some zamindars refused to allow the Gwalas to hold a meeting in their village, a serious riot was with difficulty averted ... several minor riots have occurred.

(Das 1983, p. 71)

This report by the British administrator indicates that the Yadavs' claim to wear sacred thread should not be seen only in cultural terms as it is more of economic and social oppression. Sanskritization was attempted as the means by lower caste peasants to get rid of economic and social oppression. It appears that the caste functioned both at the level of production relation and the superstructure. Therefore, it was fought at the level of "infrastructure" and the "superstructure."

Besides the Sanskritization movements among Yadavs, Kurmis also attempted to gain upward mobility through this process. The Sanskritization process of the Kurmis is best understood as the "Hindu method of tribal absorption," According to Das, this tribal group whose name obviously derives from the totemic symbol of the tortoise (kurm) were considered as tribes even until the beginning of the 20th century and were often classified by British administrators as "criminal tribes." While the Kurmis in the plains had settled down to agriculture, others like the Kurmi Mahtos of Chhotanagpur were still on the margins of food production.

The extension of agriculture saw the Kurmis becoming good at cultivation and gradually their tribal identities were replaced, and they found a place in the caste hierarchy. Successive census operations saw Kurmis of various types—the Awadhiyas, the Mahtos, and even the lowly horticulturist, rather than agriculturist Koeris, coming together to demand a higher gradation than was allotted to them. Claims of being Kshatriyas were rooted in the "kurubans" of Mahabharata or the Kauravas. Sanskritization was attempted through vegetarianism, wearing the sacred thread, etc. And in time-honored tradition, Brahmins were found to sanctify the Kurmis' new social position within the caste system just as various others had been transferred earlier into "twice-born" through "*hirangarbha*" (golden womb) and other ceremonies by Brahmins in earlier ages for a suitable consideration. In the "*hirangarbha*" ceremony, a tribal potentate who wished to Sanskritize himself into a *Kshatriya* entered a golden pot symbolizing a womb. This was done under the ministration of a Brahmin who was ready to sanctify a higher ritual status for people of means. After the ceremony, the potentate emerged after his symbolic second birth as a higher caste person. The Brahmin took the pot as his fee. The census of 1931 remarks: The Brahmins who got fees were rather encouraging them (the upwardly mobile lower caste), though privately they refused their social status improved in anyway. In spite of quiet sniggering by the hypocritical Brahmins, the social status of Kurmis kept rising, not on account of ritual observances alone but because of their benefiting from active involvement in commercial agriculture at which, not being hamstrung by taboos of manual labor, they had become adept. It was this that gave the Kurmis of Bihar a wider outlook and they initiated the All India Kurmi-Kshatriya Sabha where they sought kinship with diverse peasant groups such as the Patidars of Gujrat, on the dubious phonetic similarity between "Kurmi" and "Kunbi".

Therefore, a reform movement from within was started among backward castes. And for this, they started organizing themselves into caste associations. They also got support from similar caste groups at an all-Indian level. The assertion of backward caste was not liked by upper castes and hence, they let loose a reign of terror on them. They snatched away the sacred thread and

denied them the status of “twice-born.” They also caused obstruction in the marriages of the backward castes, refused to give them water from their wells and prohibited the use of public roads. The lands of some of the backward castes were auctioned away by the upper castes. Some of them were thrown out of their jobs. They were also abused and beaten by the upper castes. As the spate of violence targeting the lower and backward castes increased, they formed a united front to resist violence by upper castes. This resulted in the formation of a caste coalition including Ahir (Yadavs), Koeris and Kurmis called “*Triveni Sangh*” in 1933. The major issues of contention with the upper castes were an increase in wages, denial of dignity and its violation. The upper castes, being the landed gentry, would employ the laborers who were primarily lower castes, but did not pay minimum wages to them. Any resistance from the lower castes was violently suppressed. The Triveni Sangh effectively challenged the dominance of the upper-caste landed gentry but gradually receded into the background due to inherent contradictions and accommodation policy of the upper-caste dominated Congress Party.

### **From movement to participation in democratic politics**

Analytically, there are three important phases of the rise of backward caste politics in Bihar. The first phase is the election of 1967 when backward caste members increased their representation in the Bihar Vidhan Sabha. The second phase is the election of 1977 which was fought largely on the issue of reservation for backward castes in government employment when Karpoori Thakur became the chief minister. He was from the numerically small *Nai* or barber caste (a lower backward caste). The third phase is the post-1990s, which can be considered a rise of backward caste politics. This assertion was embodied in the emergence of Laloo Prasad Yadav as the leader of Janta Dal in 1990 and later floated his own party, the Rashtriya Janta Dal (RJD) in 1998. Post-1990s politics also saw the growing *Yadavization* which alienated the *Koeris-Kurmis*, a cognate upper backward caste group that deserted Janta Dal to form the Samata Party in 1994 and joined hands with the Hindu right-wing Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) in national and state politics. The underlying factor for the emergence of backward caste politics was the rise of the rural bourgeoisie. Before going into the different phases of backward caste politics, the rise of the rural bourgeoisie will be analyzed.

### **Rise of the rural bourgeoisie among the backward castes**

The political process set into motion by this awakening will naturally be subjected to a backlash from those who have enjoyed power and privilege for close to half a century. Also, the neo-privileged from the deprived sections need not necessarily pursue the interest of large masses in whose name they are likely to assume power (as some of them already have). For the masses, the journey remains long.

Political mobilization of the rising rural bourgeoisie and gradually graduating into power did not result in the uplift of the masses. The political aspiration of the bearers of power from the deprived section is largely based on their own economic interests. Nevertheless, it is important to study the relationship between the consolidation of landholdings among upper middle castes and their increased representation in the Bihar Legislative Assembly. Table 18.1 shows the relationship between caste and landownership and Table 18.2 gives caste-wise representation in the legislative assembly from 1962 to 1977.

The growth of capitalist farmers (i.e., Kulaks) took a decisive leap forward mainly after the mid-1960s due to the green revolution. In the political arena this finds expression in the Kulaks dominating the state-level ruling party in Haryana, UP and Bihar. Another factor, which was

*Caste movement in Bihar*

Table 18.1 Caste, Class and Land Ownership in the Plains of Rural Bihar<sup>1</sup>

Caste	Percentage of the people in each of the caste groups				Per capita cultivated land owned in (acres)		
	Land owned (acres)	Class	Landlord and rich peasant	Middle peasant	Poor peasant		
0	0-5	5-10	10+	All			
Upper castes	5.7	62.1	17.9	14.3	100(22.2)	89.5	2.9
Upper middle castes	25.9	64.4	5.5	2.2	100(21.7)	27.8	35.1
Other middle castes	60.9	37.6	0.0	1.5	100(16.3)	7.5	9.2
Scheduled Castes	69.5	30.4	0.1	0.0	100(27.2)	2.0	4.4
Hindus	40.9	48.7	5.9	4.5	100(87.4)	31.6	12.5
Muslims	58.6	35.4	4.4	1.6	100(12.6)	21.0	10.3
All	43.1	47.0	5.8	4.1	100(100)	30.3	12.2

<sup>1</sup>Note: Figures in parentheses refer to percentage distribution with reference to the row total.

Source: An empirical research study by the International Labour Office Geneva, and ANS Institute of Social Studies, Patna. As quoted in "Rise of Kulak Power and Class Struggle in North India," by Pradhan H. Prasad, *Economic and Political Weekly*, August 17, 1991, p. 1925.

Table 18.2 Caste Composition of Parties and Coalitions in Power in Bihar Vidhan Sabha, 1962–77 (Figures in Percentage)<sup>a</sup>

Caste group	1962	1967	1969	1975	1977	State population
<b>Upper caste</b>						
Brahman	14.1	8.6	11.8	16.0	2.8	4.6
Bhumihar	13.6	11.1	10.5	9.3	12.0	2.8
Rajput	14.1	24.1	19.1	14.4	19.0	4.1
Kayastha	6.0	3.1	2.6	1.5	5.1	1.2
Total	47.8	46.9	44.0	41.2	39.3	12.7
<b>Upper backward caste</b>						
Bania	2.7	3.1	3.3	4.1	2.8	0.6
Yadav	8.2	14.8	15.1	9.3	14.3	10.7
Kurmi	6.5	1.2	3.3	4.6	2.3	3.5
Koeri	6.5	6.8	3.9	4.1	4.1	4.0
Total	23.9	25.9	25.6	22.1	23.5	18.8
Lower backward caste	0.5	3.1	1.3	1.5	2.3	31.2
Total backward caste	24.4	29.0	26.9	23.6	25.8	50.0
Muslims	8.2	4.9	8.6	10.3	6.5	12.2
Bengali and others	1.1	3.1	0.0	0.5	2.3	2.4
Scheduled castes	17.4	11.7	12.5	15.5	18.0	13.8
Scheduled tribes	1.1	4.3	7.9	8.8	8.3	8.9
Grand total	100	99.9	99.9	99.9	100.2	100.0

<sup>a</sup> As quoted in p. 68. Rising Kulaks and Backward Classes in Bihar: Social Change in the Late 1970s. Harry W Blair, Special Article, EPW, January 12, 1980.

important for the success of the deprived communities in the political field, is the formation of community identity through caste associations as numerical strength plays a significant role in democratic politics. Caste alliances are also made to realize secular interests.

It is very much evident from Table 18.2 that the share of upper castes in regional power politics declined from 47.8 percent in 1962 to 39.3 percent in 1977. Again, the gradual increase of backward castes is too significant to be ignored. The difference between the upper castes i.e., 39.3 and the total backward caste i.e., 25.8 in 1977 is less than 10 percent. It was more than enough for the upper castes to resent the reservation policy benefiting the backward castes. On the other hand, the backward castes whose participation increased to a considerable extent wanted more benefits and became more aggressive in democratic politics. This period also witnessed the shifting alliance of different caste groups and as a result it became increasingly difficult to control power by particular caste groups. The alternative method was to challenge the upper-caste hegemony through adequate representation in government jobs. In this context, Prasad explains the manifestation of class in caste terms: In caste terms, the state level ruling class is upper castes and their traditional role are being challenged by the upper middle castes. This is the caste character of the current political struggle in Bihar which is essentially the phenomenon of class struggle. But people are mobilized on caste lines and not on class lines because class-consciousness is yet to emerge in a semi-feudal social formation whereas caste identities have been deep-rooted. The castes in India which represent the traditional classes on the basis of an archaic feudal division of labor, survive with extraordinary rigidity mainly

because the large bulk of people have been stuck in the quagmire of poverty and backwardness for centuries.

However, with the rise of rural bourgeoisie among three backward castes the earlier contradictions between upper-caste class vs lower-caste class changed. In this situation, the upper-middle caste rich peasants have also become exploiters of rural proletariat. Therefore, this class is facing the challenge from below, i.e., the rural proletariat is constituted mainly of lower backward castes and Dalits. The struggle of the rural proletariat has resulted in the form of a Naxalite movement which began in late 1960s and continues to date albeit with less intensity. Because of this class war, Bihar experienced a series of massacres and violence resulting in the formation of caste armies by the landed castes against the mobilizing rural proletariat.

### **Bihar Assembly election of 1967**

The result of 1967 elections was striking proof of a newly conscious peasantry. The Congress Party, dominated by landowning upper castes, was defeated because of the withdrawal of support by the awakened middle peasantry. Its vote share decreased from 58 percent in 1962 to 40 percent. The party that did the damage was the Samyukta Socialist Party that fought the elections on the issue of “backwardism” and was dominated by Yadavs, Kurmis and Koeris. It improved its share of seats from 2 percent to 21 percent. Together, the two communist parties, CPI and CPI (M) garnered 9 percent of seats which was an improvement from their earlier 4 percent. This election also witnessed multi-cornered contests in almost all of the assembly constituencies.<sup>1</sup>

The council of Ministers during the time of upper caste Chief Minister M. P. Sinha was predominantly composed of upper caste members (13 out of 21); and during the time of B. P. Mandal, a backward caste chief minister, by a majority of backward castes 29 out of 38). However, due to the machinations of the upper-caste bureaucracy, the first backward caste government could not survive for long.

### **Caste and reservation politics**

The sustained demand of the Other Backward Class (OBC) leaders and their growing political power pressured the Congress government in 1971 to constitute the Mungeri Lal Commission. This commission listed 128 castes as OBC and 93 others as Most Backward Caste (MBC), taking into account social status, educational backwardness, adequacy of the representation in government services and share in trade, commerce, industry, etc. The commission recommended 26 percent reservation for jobs and 24 percent for educational institutions. The then Jagannath Mishra government did not take any action on these recommendations. It was the Janata Party government in 1977, headed by Karpoori Thakur which implemented these recommendations.

As against 49.5 percent reservation recommended by Mandal Commission (taking SCs, STs, OBCs together) there existed provisions for 50 percent reservations in government jobs and educational institutions in Bihar: 3 percent for women, 8 percent for backward classes, 14 percent for Scheduled Castes (SCs), 10 percent for Scheduled Tribes (STs) and 3 percent for economically backward upper caste people. Except those for the SCs and STs, all other reservations were available to those whose annual family income was less than the minimum income tax limit. These provisions were made by Karpoori Thakur government in 1978.<sup>2</sup>

During this time the upper castes launched a strong anti-reservation movement leading to a virtual caste war. They did not oppose reservation for SCs and STs because their monopoly was not threatened by Dalits while the OBC reservation was likely to threaten their monopoly. They also tried to win over the Dalits to their side and popularized the “*agra-harijan bhai bhai, yeh pichhdi jati kahan se aie*” (upper castes and *Harijans* are brothers, from where have these backward castes cropped up?).

Another reason for the rabid anti-backward class agitation then was the Janata Party’s coming to power in post-Emergency Lok Sabha elections in 1977 which epitomized the ascendency of backward classes in politics. It was also true that the attempt during the Emergency to implement land reform measures and a crackdown on the bureaucracy to improve their work culture, had enraged the upper castes. They therefore, particularly the Rajputs and Kayashthas, supported the Janata Party, a combination of almost all the opposition parties who came together to oppose Mrs Indira Gandhi of Congress who had imposed the Emergency, suspended all rights, press freedom and jailed opposition leaders. But the election of Karpoori Thakur, the leader of backward castes, as chief minister was seen as a threat by the upper castes to their hold over state’s politics and administration.

This is also reflected when through the reservation issue, Karpoori Thakur asserted that the backward has displaced the forward as the dominant force in Bihar politics, that the old days of dominance in public affairs by the “twice-born” are gone forever, and that (his) government would be based on the support of the backwards.” The forwards too interpreted these developments similarly and feared that their days of dominance indeed had ended. They responded with a mixture of fear and rage. But, finally in April 1979 the combination of a forward–Harijan alliance in the assembly and the conflict within the Janata Party at the national level brought down the Thakur government. It was succeeded by a ministry headed by a Harijan, Ram Sunder Das, but dominated by the same combination of forwards and Jana Sangh people who had defeated the Thakur government.<sup>3</sup>

### **1990 assembly election and the Laloo phenomenon**

The appeal to social justice, equity and self-respect of the backward and the depressed people of society, which Laloo Yadav has employed so effectively to sustain his populist agenda, is not new. Such appeals have a history and notable spokesmen. However, that does not make their importance any less as they were voiced by Laloo Yadav in the 1990s. It places the slogans in the larger history of social experience of which they are a part.

The results of the Bihar Assembly election of 1990 are important to understand how the notions of democracy and democratic processes and social justice impacted the victims of social exclusion. The aggressive movement by the lower castes to break into the political and developmental processes had finally resulted in success. The growing consciousness among the lower castes enabled them to take over political power, displacing the rule of numerically small upper castes. For the first time ever in 1990, the Bihar Assembly elections saw OBC MLAs elected in large numbers which paved the way for Laloo Yadav to become the chief minister. For the first time, the major numerical force displaced the firmly entrenched upper castes from power. The main reason was that the poor cast their votes in large numbers in favor of Laloo Yadav despite facing threats to their life in the process. They were effectively mobilized by the speeches of Laloo Yadav against the upper-caste landlords. The occasion of an OBC chief minister taking office imparted in the subaltern castes a sense of dignity and victory that they had never experienced before.

This assembly election also saw the weakening of Rajput-Backward alliance forged because of the perceived loyalty of Rajputs to their caste leader V. P. Singh. In fact, during the Lok Sabha election of 1989, it played an important role in the success of Janata Dal. When the reservation issue came up in 1990, there was a sharp polarization of upper castes vs backward castes. For backward castes, reservation was very important for upward social and economic mobility. Therefore, they supported Janata Dal and the party swept the polls. In addition to that, the central leadership was more inclined towards backward castes so that the Yadavs and Kurmis got a fair number of seats in the elections which effectively sidelined the upper castes. The Congress (I) which was an upper-caste dominated party had to field a record number of 105 candidates to face the backward caste candidates of Janata Dal.<sup>4</sup> The most significant outcome of this election was the substantial increase in representation of backward and lower castes in the legislative assembly. The most visible castes among backwards who got substantial representation in the assembly were from upper backward castes. Thus, there were 63 Yadavs, 18 Kurmis, 12 Koeris and 16 Banias elected to the assembly. There were altogether 117 members of backward castes in the state assembly election held in 1995.

However, the united front of the backward castes also witnessed its split. This was particularly because of the growing representation of Yadavs due to their numerical strength. The split appeared first between the Yadavs and Kurmis on the question of getting nominations for the seats. As the Yadavs were the forerunners in the process of political mobilization (due to the fact that two chief ministers were Yadavs), both the BJP and Congress tried to lure Yadavs to their side by giving them more nominations than other castes. This further increased the rivalries between the Kurmis and Yadavs. The Koeris backed the Kurmis on this question because Koeris see themselves as a cognate caste of Kurmis. As a result, the Samata Party was formed in 1994, on the “votebank” of Kurmis and Koeris.

Given the nature of social stratification in Bihar a small number of “twice-born” have controlled the resources and thus deprived the vast population of backward and lower castes, the “politicization of castes” was bound to pay rich dividends to Laloo Prasad Yadav. More specifically, the electoral base of Laloo has been the middle/backward castes like Yadavs along with other lower castes. To understand the electoral mobilization of the caste, it is important to see the population of the respective castes.

The social universe in Bihar is fragmented with more than 135 Hindu and Muslim castes. But when reduced to six broad categories:

1. Five twice-born castes constitute 13.6 percent (*Brahmins* 4.7 percent, *Bhumihar Brahmins* 2.9 percent, *Rajputs* 4.2 percent, *Kayasthas* 1.2 percent and *Banias* 0.6 percent).
2. Upper *Shudras* or upper backward castes 18.7 percent (Yadavs 11 percent, Kurmis 3.6 percent and Koeris 4.1 percent).
3. Lower *Shudras* 32 percent.
4. Muslims 12.5 percent.
5. Scheduled Castes 14 percent.
6. Scheduled Tribes 9.1 percent.

Therefore, the population-wise social universe of Bihar shows that the numerical preponderance of the lower castes and its united front under the plank of “social justice” ensured their success in electoral politics. Laloo Prasad was very successful in uniting all lower and backward castes to challenge the monopoly of upper castes in political power. He allocated a major share of seats to backward and lower castes. Within this, a major share was given to his caste people,

Table 18.3 Caste-wise Breakdown of Members of Bihar Vidhan Sabha 1967–2000 (Figures in Absolute Numbers)

Caste	1967	1969	1972	1977	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000
<i>Upper backward castes</i>									
Yadav	37	47	35	51	46	47	63	86	64
Kurmi	14	12	20	21	20	12	12	13	12
Koeri	13	13	8	6	12	18	18	27	22
Baniya	13	16	8	10	13	9	18	18	12
<b>Total (A)</b>	<b>77</b>	<b>88</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>88</b>	<b>91</b>	<b>86</b>	<b>111</b>	<b>144</b>	<b>110</b>
<i>Lower backward castes</i>									
Kahar	1	—	1	—	—	—	1	3	1
Dhanuk	2	—	1	—	—	—	—	1	2
Tattma	1	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	1
Nai	1	1	1	1	1	1	—	1	1
Mallah	—	2	1	—	2	2	2	1	4
Bhaant	—	—	1	—	—	—	—	—	—
Kharwaar	—	1	1	1	—	—	1	1	—
Noniaa	—	—	—	1	2	—	1	2	1
Badhai	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	—	—
Gangota	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	2	1
Kewat	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	2	1
Rajwaar	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	—
Paneri	—	1	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Total (B)	5	5	6	4	5	3	6	16	11
<b>Total</b>	<b>82</b>	<b>93</b>	<b>77</b>	<b>92</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>89</b>	<b>117</b>	<b>160</b>	<b>121</b>
<b>(A + B)</b>									
<i>Upper Caste</i>									
Brahman	32	28	39	20	37	30	27	9	8
Bhumihar	26	36	44	40	39	38	34	18	19
Rajput	54	50	48	55	38	46	41	22	26
Kayasth	11	8	5	9	6	4	3	7	3
<b>Total (C)</b>	<b>123</b>	<b>122</b>	<b>136</b>	<b>124</b>	<b>120</b>	<b>118</b>	<b>105</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>56</b>

Yadavs. The share of backward and lower castes increased significantly when he was in power. This is reflected in Table 18.3.

Table 18.3 shows that the share of backward castes increased significantly during the rule of Laloo Prasad Yadav and his political party, the RJD. There is also another viewpoint which does not give Laloo Prasad the entire credit given to him. Development is part of the historical process in which several leaders supported the cause of the backwards. As such it was not fair that Laloo Yadav was given all credit for this process. But when we compare Laloo's regime and those of other political backward caste leaders, the representation of backward castes is very significant in Laloo's rule. Therefore, the 1990s marks the rise of backward caste politics in a real sense.

If we see the trends of representation of lower and upper castes in the state government according to Table 18.3, then in 1990 there were 105 upper caste MLAs which had decreased from 118 in 1985. Further in 1995, the share of the lower-caste members jumped from 117 in 1990 to 160 in 1995. After the bifurcation of Jharkhand from Bihar, there were 121 members

of the backward castes compared to 56 upper-caste members. This process can be termed as horizontal mobilization of backward castes.

### **Competing upper backward castes**

As Table 18.3 indicates the Yadavs got the maximum number of seats in the Bihar legislative assembly during Laloo's rule. This can be explained in terms of the numerical preponderance and relatively better economic position of this caste. This data reflect that Yadavs got more seats than what their numbers dictated, while Koeris and Kurmis got fewer compared to the Yadavs. This "unfair" treatment meted out to the Koeris and Kurmis resulted in the formation of the Samata Party in 1994 under the leadership of Nitish Kumar of the Kurmi caste. While these developments can be interpreted as the result of the increasing consolidation of Yadavs at the cost of the rest of backward and lower castes, it is partially true.

A counter viewpoint is presented thus: The splitting of the OBC vote has more to do with a desire for socio-economic betterment than any love for ideology, either Mandal or Hindutva, since the Samata Party made an alliance with the BJP. The Kurmis endorsed the BJP-Samata alliance not because they developed a sudden love for the politics of Ram, but because many of them are upwardly mobile, wannabe upper castes who felt uncomfortable with Laloo Prasad's cultivation of poverty. It is estimated that Bihar today has more doctors and engineers from among the Kurmis than any other castes. They are also among the relatively better-off professionals, more vulnerable in a region where kidnapping for ransom is a major industry. Therefore, the urge for law and order among Kurmis and rejection of Laloo-led lawlessness is understandable.

This account can be interpreted as the "political Sanskritization" of Kurmis who identify themselves more with the upper castes than the lower income group of OBCs including the poor Yadavs. This is especially true of the specific regions of Bihar where Kurmis are landlords, such as Patna, Nalanda and Rohtas. Also, the Kurmis are concentrated in the above regions mainly and have no rivalry with the upper-caste landlords. Caste relations are fairly balanced since the Kurmis are not found in the regions where upper castes are landlords. Therefore, an alliance with the upper castes is easier for the Kurmis and also more convenient. While the Kurmi leadership might have found it easy and convenient to have an alliance with the BJP, how would it be able to explain it and promote harmonious unity when its "votebank" comprised the Extremely Backward Castes (EBC), *Pasmanda* of the Muslim community and *Maha-Dalits*.

There is an argument that the planks of "social justice" and "secularism" used by Laloo Prasad had succeeded more at a psychological level than at a material level as Bihar continued to lag behind in terms of development. Therefore, the slogans of social justice and secularism cannot mean anything without a unity of theory and praxis with a vision of empowerment of the subaltern castes. This is where the regime of Laloo failed, on its performance on its agenda of empowerment of subaltern castes through such policies as land reforms, free and quality health and education for all.

However, he was successful in changing the power structure of Bihar polity and society. Some of the steps taken by him benefited mainly the elites among the backward castes. To name a few, in 1993, the Patna University and Bihar University Amendment Bill were passed, according to which 50 percent of the seats would be reserved for OBCs in the universities' administrative bodies of Senate and Syndicate. In the same year, a member of the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) from the SCs replaced a Brahman as Chief Secretary and an OBC took charge as Director General of Police (DGP) from another Brahman. A large number of OBC bureaucrats were given prime postings, and the number of District Magistrates (DM) and Deputy Divisional

Commissioners (DDC) from OBCs increased and even exceeded those from the upper castes. Again in 1993, the Bihar assembly passed the Panchayati Raj Bill according to which “the Panchayats with majority of people belonging to backward classes will be reserved for them only and in these panchayats upper caste will be debarred from even contesting elections.” This Bill was unanimously passed by both houses of the state legislature (Jaffrelot 2010, p. 477).

But in this process of changing power structure, the elites of the Yadavs benefited the most as the trend was already perceived by Lohia in the 1960s. For instance, Yadavs were appointed as the heads of important boards such as the Bihar Public Service Commission, the Bihar Secondary Education Service Commission, the Bihar State Electricity Board, and the Bihar Industrial Development Corporation. As a result, Kurmi leadership resented Laloo’s bias in favor of his caste people that resulted in the Kurmis setting up their own party, the Samata Party as early as 1994 which had a continued political alliance with the BJP.

However, in spite of neglecting the substantial empowerment of Economically Backward Classes (EBCs) and supporting the elites among Yadavs in establishing their hegemony in the political economy of Bihar, his important contributions to the socio-political dynamics of the state cannot be ignored. He gave social and political consciousness to a huge section of the subaltern masses such as Dalits, the backward of the backwards, the urban poor. He was the first leader to give them a sense of being part of mainstream society, a sense of self-respect and empowerment. Another important contribution was halting the juggernaut of Hindutva in Bihar. During the period of communal upheaval in the 1990s, he gave the Muslims of Bihar a sense of security, they were safer in Bihar than anywhere else in the country. He was successful in creating a political culture based on the values of social justice and secularism.

### **Backward castes and post-Laloo Bihar**

The rise of Nitish Kumar in 2005 and 2010 can be seen in the context of the discourse of “social justice” and “secularism” albeit in a different sense. Nitish Kumar has become successful in ending the era of Laloo Yadav by making a larger alliance of neglected EBCs, *Pasmanda* (Dalit Muslims), *Mahadalits*, upper castes and militant Hindu nationalists. He promised land reforms, to revamp the schooling system and to enhance affirmative action for EBCs. Even if he were successful in ensuring reservations for EBCs and women in the Panchayati raj institution, Nitish Kumar could not implement the agenda of land reform as the landed castes opposed this move of transforming the agrarian structure in favor of the land-poor. On the contrary, the agenda of good governance (*sushasan*) adversely affected the Dalits and the landless in the form of rising waves of anger against Dalits. Both upper castes and upper forwards targeted Dalits, calling them thieves and criminals, and lynching them. Following the murder of the Ranbir Sena Chief by an unidentified criminal, Dalit students were attacked by upper-caste students in the hostels of Patna University on the pretext that they were involved in the murder. The state administration looked the other way as Dalits came under attack across the state. This gave rise to jokes spoofing Nitish Kumar’s promise of *sushasan* or good governance. They said, it was not *sushasan* but *bhu-shasan*, governance by Bhumihars.

When we analyze the post-Laloo regime in terms of the representation in the power structure of Bihar, we find the dominance of Bhumihars and Kurmis. As a result of this, a prominent Koeri leader, Upendra Kushwaha split from the Janta Dal (United) (JDU) and formed his own party, the Rashtriya Lok Samata Party (RLSP), in March 2013. The reason for the JDU-BJP split was because of Nitish Kumar’s opposition to the leadership of Modi. Nitish Kumar supported the candidature of veteran BJP leader L. K. Advani to attract the Muslim vote. It is a puzzle as to how one can differentiate between the communalism of Advani and Modi considering both

of them are the product of same political ideology of Hindutva. Therefore, the secularism of Nitish Kumar is a different variety of social justice blended with Hindutva. During the rule of the JDU-BJP alliance, Bihar witnessed a series of communal riots mainly because the growth of the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak (RSS) was facilitated by the massive success of the BJP that rode on the votebank of its political ally, the JDU.

## **Conclusion**

The backward castes in Bihar, as elsewhere in India, are a collective of heterogeneous communities comprising peasant castes, service castes and artisan castes. They have always been associated with the social structure of caste and production relations. However, a common feature of the backward castes is that they are above the pollution line that is applied to the Dalits. Therefore, when we try to understand the backward caste movement, we know that the artisan and service castes are not as conscious of their exploitation as the peasant castes among the backward castes. Another reason is that the artisan and service castes are fewer in terms of numbers and hence not widely affected by the caste-based division of labor organized in the Jajmani system. Even if the Jajmani relationship is based on domination and exploitation, these castes are not able to perceive their real economic interests and being artisan castes they were relatively less exploited. That is the reason that there was an absence of the caste-based organization of EBCs during the colonial period when other backward castes already started organizing themselves in caste associations for the articulation of their interests. With the introduction of democratic politics, the numerically large castes were able to capitalize more on the development process and a significant number among them were peasant castes from the backward castes. The EBCs accepted the upper backward castes as their leaders.

But it can be observed that in spite of the huge support of the EBCs to the larger OBC politics and its leadership, they are historically excluded in terms of their representation in democratic politics. For instance, if we see their representation in the Bihar assembly, their presence is almost negligible. In spite of their significant numerical strength, although fragmented in a number of castes, they are mostly controlled and used by the OBC leadership. It is a challenge of the OBC movement to incorporate the interests of the significant part of the OBC community, particularly the EBCs. Now, the question is whether there are any common interests of OBCs beyond the issue of reservation. It seems there is not any common interest of OBCs beyond reservations, and the upper castes have almost accepted reservation as a norm in public sector jobs as they are better equipped for the growing private sector jobs in times of a liberalized economy. Besides, the reservation for OBCs has been diluted with the inclusion of the dominant castes in peasantry such as Jats in the central list of OBCs. They had been excluded by the Mandal Commission because of their far better social and economic condition. Surinder S. Jodhka summarized this process in the following words:

the acceptance of their demand could produce an exclusionary effect. The really “backward,” those who are located just above the so-called “pollution line,” the landless and the poor, would lose out in the process. And they are large in number, perhaps much more numerous than the Jats, though not united as a single social category like the Jats.

*(Jodhka 2014)*

Therefore, the emerging trends in backward caste politics indicate that the EBCs or Most Backward Castes (MBCs) should unite and gain their share of power against the dominant OBCs. This is the challenge facing the lower caste parties. So, it becomes significant that the

lower-caste political parties encourage the leadership among their castes in order to ensure their social inclusion in democratic politics, as they were always a significant part of the larger backward caste politics.

There is another question: How do we understand the association of many backward and Dalit leaders with the right-wing political parties such as the BJP? Is it a question of mere self-interest or their marginalization by their own communities? It is very difficult to have a single answer to this question because politics is witnessing the “end of ideology” phase and the beginning of the phase where individual interests prevail rather than the interests of the community.

### **Notes**

- 1 See Congress Debacle in Bihar: Voting Pattern in 1967. Navneeth. EPW, August 24, 1968. pp. 1312.
- 2 For details see Indu Bharti: The Politics of Anti-reservation Stir, EPW, February 10, 1990.
- 3 The Forward-Harijan alliance may be explained as it is pointed out that the rising backwards are also facing a challenge from below, for the same expansionary tendencies within the Indian electoral system that got them involved in politics has also energized those at bottom level, the Harijans, who are in general the landless agricultural laborers of Bihar. A few Harijans have been led by Naxlite cadres to demand better working conditions, but far more have been awakened through the populist rhetoric of the Congress and Janata Party regimes on land reforms, minimum wages, bonded labor debt redemption and so on. The Harijans then constituted a threat to the dominance of the backwards, at least in so far as they can ally with the forwards. Rising Kulaks and backward classes in Bihar. Harry W. Blair. EPW, January 12, 1980. pp. 71.
- 4 For details see, Bihar Ballot: Expected Outcome. Indu Bharti, EPW, March 24, 1990. pp. 595.

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# 19

## THE OTHER BACKWARD CLASSES IN BENGAL

### Exclusion, exploitation and empowerment

*Mahua Sarkar*

#### **Introduction**

Caste has a crucial importance as a concept and social practice in India, having existed since its inception as a pan-Indian institution with some common ideology and norms. Sociologist Anne Waldrop observes that while outsiders view the term “caste” as a static phenomenon of stereotypical tradition-bound India, empirical facts suggest that caste has been a radically changing feature (Waldrop 2004). The term means different things to different Indians. In the context of politically active modern India, where caste-based reservation in employment and education has become the norm, the term has become a sensitive and controversial issue.

#### **Definition of caste**

In a review published in 1944, D. D. Kosambi noted that “Almost every statement of a general nature made by anyone about Indian castes may be contradicted” (Ghurye 1969). The term “caste” has no universally accepted definition. To define caste, G. S. Ghurye wrote in 1932 that, despite much study by many people,

we do not possess a real general definition of caste. It appears to me that any attempt at definition is bound to fail because of the complexity of the phenomenon. On the other hand, much literature on the subject is marred by lack of precision about the use of the term.

*(Leach 1960)*

Ghurye did attempt to find the middle-ground between the complexity and the loose usage. He defined six characteristics of the Hindu caste system as a “social philosophy” prior to the relatively modern corruption of this by theories of “rights and duties.” He thought that these could be applied across the country, although he acknowledged that there were regional variations on the general theme.<sup>3</sup> The six characteristics are:

1. Strict segmentation of society, with the various groups being rigidly defined and membership of them determined by birth.
2. A hierarchical system that defines a ranking place for all of the castes.
3. Limited choice of occupation which is enforced within a caste as well as by other castes. A caste might follow more than one traditional occupation, but its members would nonetheless be constrained to that range.
4. The general practice of endogamy is followed, although in some situations hypergamy is acceptable. Endogamy applies to the various subgroups within a caste itself, preventing marriage between the subgroups and sometimes imposing an additional geographical constraint that one can only marry a person from the same gotra and the same place.
5. Restrictions on dietary and social interactions that define who could consume what and accept from whom.
6. As with marriage arrangements, these restrictions apply at subcaste level, not merely at the caste level.<sup>1</sup>

Not everyone has agreed with the definition proposed by Ghurye, which in any event, was intended as an exercise to reduce the gap between lax terminological usage and the realities of an immensely complex system. Almost like Ghurye, Edmund Leach also, instead of offering a definition, has only identified five distinctive features distinguishing this system and these are: hierarchy, endogamy, hereditary occupation, untouchability and restrictions on commensality (Dube 2010). But given the wide cultural diversities of India, it is difficult to find all these features in the same form or content in all the regions of the subcontinent. Again, during the colonial period, there were other processes of cultural change, for example, “Sanskritization,” “Westernization” or “Secularization” (Chapman 1995) which further transposed the ritual system and altered the patterns of interaction between individuals and groups. But this happened in different ways in different regions. More recently, Graham Chapman is among those who have reiterated the complexity, and he notes that there are differences between theoretical constructs and the practical reality.<sup>2</sup>

### Caste and class

Interestingly, we define the marginalized *groups* of India as “Scheduled Castes,” “Scheduled Tribes” and “Other Backward Classes.” This requires a clarification of the meanings of caste and class from an Indian perspective. As each caste was associated with a hereditary traditional occupation, that was indicative also of a social division of labor. It is here that caste could perhaps be compared with class, which can best be defined in terms of the forces and relations of production and ownership of property.<sup>3</sup> But the major problem about this assumption of a caste–class continuum arises from the supposed difference in the nature of inter-group relationships in the two systems of social organization. In the caste system, this relationship is conceptualized as one of “economic interdependence,”<sup>4</sup> resting on the “bonds of cooperation” (Sinha 1968). The hierarchy, therefore, is never dissolved, as the “functional specialization and hierarchy are organically linked in the system” (Feur 2015). The relationship between classes is, on the other hand, one of competition, or in the Marxian sense, of “hostile opposition” (Bailey 1963). The complexities in the class structure are ultimately expected to be reduced to a binary opposition between the two classes, the haves and the have-nots. F. G. Bailey has, therefore, distinguished between the two systems of stratification, that is caste and class, by describing the former as a “closed organic stratification” and the latter as “segmentary stratification,” cooperation and competition being the two principles determining inter-group relationship in the two systems (Singh 1997).

To some scholars, however, these differences between the caste and class systems appear to be notional and not real. The idea of the absence of conflict or opposition in inter-caste relationships, some of them think, has indeed been “overdrawn”<sup>5</sup> because of an undue reliance on the *shastra* (scriptures), which is in itself a legacy of the colonial ethnological discourse.<sup>6</sup> If there was cooperation at the economic level, it was more imposed than voluntary, as was also the acceptance of the cultural attributes of rank and of the social roles indicated by it. This became possible as in most cases there was a close correspondence between the secular and ritual ranks of individuals (Sinha 1994); the class situation in Indian society, according to some scholars, often expressed itself through the religious idioms of caste, or one could find class content in caste forms.<sup>7</sup> According to the Ambedkarite position, castes were “enclosed classes,” and in this sense, it was even worse than the class system, as it did not allow for mobility or dynamic social interaction (Illaiah 1998). The theoretical strand which assumes the existence of “intersections” where caste and class converge, may run into difficulty when it comes to the consideration of social mobility, which also indicates the possibilities of divergence. It is impossible to deny that occupational mobility had been present in the Indian caste system at every period of its history (Silverberg 1968) and colonial rule is believed to have further facilitated this dispersal of wealth and power across caste lines. This increasing occupational and consequently, status differentiation within each caste may therefore also lead us to the most valid conclusion that caste and class, though they often coincided, could also cut across (Andre 1965). However, as empirical evidence suggests that in many, if not all, cases such discrepancies between caste-ascribed status (or ritual rank) and caste-irrelevant (economic or political) roles were gradually resolved and the cultural notions of ritual rank, based on notions of purity and impurity, began to reflect the actuality of the distributive pattern of wealth and power in society. The caste system, in other words, was never a static or “rigid” system of stratification to be distinguished from the class system, which is supposed to be “fluid” (D’Souza 1969). Indian caste society always maintained a “dynamic equilibrium” between ritual and secular status. But how was, if at all, this equilibrium maintained? This brings us to the power aspect of caste society.

Nicholas Dirks has shown that caste in precolonial south India was never just a religious concept based on notions of purity and pollution. The king was not subordinate to the priest; the crown was never hollow. On the contrary, caste ranking was measured by distance from the crown, legitimated by royal authority and associated notions of honor. “In fact,” Dirks argues in his second book, *Castes of Mind*, “caste had always been political; it had been shaped in fundamental ways by political struggles and processes.”<sup>8</sup> From a different perspective it has been argued that Indian “caste feudalism” was consolidated as a social order through an alliance of Brahminism and state power marked by “caste-class confusion.” Colonial rule used this caste structure, transformed it and to a large extent strengthened it for its own benefit. Thus, there has been a direct relationship between power, wealth and rank on the one hand, and caste, on the other.

The caste system was not exactly a class system in disguise. It was not a dichotomous system, but a system of gradation, with “a great deal of ambiguity in the middle region” where various peasant and artisan castes competed with each other for superiority of status. Moreover, although members of each caste were assigned a moral code of conduct, the hegemony of this code or dharma was often contested from within, as was found in the medieval Bhakti movement. The essence of this ethic also varied from region to region and was not always accepted universally. Moreover, opportunities for limited social mobility often led to positional changes and readjustments. Colonization of wasteland, the rise of warrior groups, the emergence of new technology or new opportunities of trade at various stages of history helped groups of people to

improve their economic and political status, and to translate that into higher ritual ranks in the caste hierarchy (Bandyopadhyay 2004).

### Silences in history

However, there is no doubt that in India, caste is a system of social stratification, which has always been used as a basis for exploitation as well as marginalization. Historically, it was not so rigid in the early Vedic period but from the later Vedic times, certain restrictions were imposed on the lower castes. Gradually, caste had separated communities into thousands of endogamous hereditary groups called *Jātis*, which were synonymous with caste in contemporary usage. The *Jātis* were grouped by the Brahminical texts into four categories or *varnas*: Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. Certain groups, who were otherized as “mlecchas” were later included in the lower rungs of the hierarchy. The lowest of all, now known as “Dalits,” were excluded from the varna system altogether, ostracized by all other castes and treated as untouchables (*asprishya*).

Protests against this Brahminical domination began to emerge with the rise of Buddhism and Jainism in the sixth century BC. In spite of that, caste restrictions were retained. Strongly identified with Hinduism, the caste system has been carried over to other religions on the Indian subcontinent, including Buddhism, Christianity, Islam and Sikhism. Hence, generally, caste is thought of as an ancient fact of Hindu life. From a sociological point of view, Matthew Ward explains that the caste system is inherently embedded in Hindu religious practices particularly the teachings of *samsara*, *dharma* and *karma*. *Samsara* views death as a moment of transition and not an end in any person’s life. *Dharma* encourages the belief that our destiny (caste) is fixed, and it cannot be changed. *Karma* is essentially predestined. Célestin Bouglé, for example, used historical reports on Indian society by Christian missionaries and some Europeans during the 17th to 19th centuries, to suggest that a rigid caste system existed in India during and before British rule in India, quite similar in many respects to the social stratification found in 17th to 19th century Europe (Bouglé 1971).

But various contemporary scholars have argued that the caste system was constructed, codified and reformulated by the British colonial regime. According to scholars such as the anthropologist Nicholas Dirks, before colonialism, caste affiliation was quite loose and fluid, but the British regime enforced caste affiliation rigorously, and constructed a much stricter hierarchy than existed previously, with some castes being criminalized and others being given preferential treatment for the sake of the ruler’s benefits.<sup>9</sup> Between the 1860s and 1920s, the British segregated Indians by caste, granting administrative jobs and senior appointments only to the upper castes who collaborated with them. Social unrest during the 1920s led to a change in this policy. From then on, the colonial administration began a policy of affirmative action by reserving a certain percentage of government jobs for the lower castes. After India achieved independence, this policy of caste-based reservation of jobs and positive discrimination was formalized with lists of Scheduled Castes (*Dalit*) and Scheduled Tribes (*Adivasi*).

To write about the history of caste, one has to address so many “silences” in history. The voices of the subaltern castes are hardly found in the metanarratives of the earlier days. Moreover, a serious method of deconstruction is required to know about the exact status of the Shudras from the discourses of the so-called elite castes. One will also have to deal with the linkages between caste and class to analyze the processes of deprivation and exploitation.

### Bengal: A case study

Caste has its regional variations too. Different regional identities have given different dimensions to this unique social institution of India. This chapter is an attempt to analyze the status of the

Other Backward Classes in Bengal. In the case of Bengal, the story of the backward and the depressed has important paradigms woven through the institution of caste. Anthropologically, Bengal was a region of mixed ethnicity.<sup>10</sup> I refer to Bengal in a geographically fluid sense as the province did not have a rigid cartographical shape from the very early days. With the Himalayas in the north and a river-laden, deeply forested delta ending in the Bay of Bengal, the province had impregnable frontiers and a changing physical space throughout the ages. Politically, Bengal had included the provinces of Bihar and Orissa during the early years of the colonial regime and the modern state of Bangladesh was also within Bengal until 1947.

Historically, there was a concerted effort to establish the hegemony of the Brahminic culture, its foundational principle being the *varnashram dharma*. It was done, as Kunal Chakrabarti has shown, through a careful process of incorporation of indigenous cultural symbols—such as the worship of local goddesses—into the structure of Vedic religion. The local traditions contested this hegemony, and the local Brahmins accepted them only very grudgingly. However, what was created as a result of this acculturation process was a regional culture, which Chakrabarti describes as a “syncretic socio-religious system” (Chakrabarti 2001). There was now an institutionalization of the Brahminical principle of social organization—the caste hierarchy; but this orthodox reaction also allowed a degree of flexibility.<sup>11</sup> However, the area produced a textbook example of a hierarchical society, populated by Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, Jain and different Adivasi cultures of different classes. Innumerable castes and subcastes were placed one above the other and their ranking was accompanied by privileges and disadvantages *vis-à-vis* each other as well as amongst themselves. The general theory of *chaturvarnya* (division of society into four castes) does not convey any idea of the real nature of the problem of the Shudras nor of its magnitude in Bengal. Besides dividing society into multiple orders, the theory goes further and makes the principle of graded inequality the basis for determining the terms of associated life. Again, the system of graded inequality was not merely notional; it was legal and penal. Under the system, the Shudra was not only placed at the bottom of the gradation, but he was subjected to innumerable ignominies and disabilities so as to prevent him from rising above the condition fixed for him. Moreover, the mutual distrust between the castes and classes, Shudras and upper castes, Hindus and Muslims led to a distancing between the two in terms of all kinds of social behavior. The picture was almost the same in all regions, including Bengal. Diversities did occur due to ecological differences and variations in the patterns of growth, but these changes were in terms of degree, not of kind.

### **Bengal: The precolonial scenario in historiography**

The first systematic study of precolonial Bengali society began with the Christian missionaries and the Orientalist observations on indigenous society. To the missionaries, as well as to the early official observers like J. S. Mill, the caste system was an unmitigated evil, an important reason for Indian backwardness and the most powerful impediment to the spread of Christianity. To the Orientalist scholars, on the other hand, it was a system that provided for stability and order in the indigenous society and, therefore, needed to be respected and studied. From the ancient Indian scriptures, they tried to retrieve and reconstruct a picture of an ideal Hindu society that was governed by religion and ordered by caste. This was a society which had its own code of law that was dominated by the Brahmins, whose power depended on a monopoly of scriptural knowledge. It was divided into endogamous subcastes or *jatis*, which had distinctive rituals, separate from each other (Bandyopadhyay 1991). The tradition of official studies that started with Buchanan Hamilton's survey of Bengal and Bihar in the early 19th century, continued with the decennial census reports since 1872 and the publications of the civilian-turned-ethnographers,

beginning from Dalton and Sherring in the early 19th century, Wise, Hunter and Risley in the late 19th century to O’Malley, Hutton and Blunt in the early 20th century.<sup>12</sup> The purpose of these ethnographic studies was to codify knowledge of the actual Indian social situation based on empirical research. But they could never get away from the scriptural stereotypes of the Orientalist period, often confusing the real and the ideal and sometimes consciously trying to impose their preconceived models on the field level data in pursuance of an imperialist agenda. Particularly significant here was the arbitrary attempt to fit in all the subcastes into a racial model of Aryan–non-Aryan dichotomy (Bandyopadhyay 1991). Although secular factors and economic parameters were sometimes taken into consideration, the basic thesis remained unchanged. The power of religion and the dominance of the Brahmin were still thought to be the bonding factors in Hindu caste society, while the situation on ground was far more complex. The early missionaries and the Orientalists believed that religion was the primary basis of social organization in the subcontinent, a stereotype that was later officially recognized and legitimated by the colonial empirical inquiries of the late 19th–early 20th centuries. This “colonial sociology” rather simplistically argued that Indian society was primarily divided into two religious categories, the Hindus and the Muslims, while the former were further subdivided into mutually-exclusive castes. Thus, as far as the Hindus were concerned, as Eric Stokes (1980) tells us, the early sociological generalization, shared by a wide range of observers from Alfred Lyall to Max Weber, would have us believe that it was essentially religion which strung all kindred groups into the great circle of castes, thus providing a discontinuity between the social and political systems and preventing the institutionalizing of an egalitarian ethic essential to a market economy. This generalization thus tended to introduce first a discourse of backwardness, and then, what Bernard Cohn has called, a “discourse of differentiation” (Cohn 1986).

Recent academic debates on caste have revolved round this stereotypical image of Indian society, as this colonial knowledge has survived the process of decolonization. The intellectual intervention of modern structuralist sociologists like Louis Dumont and T. N. Madan has provided further theoretical sophistication to this particular way of conceptualizing India only in terms of religion (Louis 1980).

### Caste society in ancient Bengal

Even indigenous observers writing in the late 19th century about Bengali caste society, could not get away from these stereotypical images (Bhattacharya 1896). The Census of 1901, presided over by H. H. Risley, conveyed the idea of a rigidly structured hierarchy, where everyone had a fixed location and a universal ritual rank. However, Risley’s own field reports would suggest that caste rank varied enormously from district to district even within the same linguistic region of Bengal.<sup>13</sup> The systematic study of pre-colonial caste society in Bengal started with the publication of Niharjan Ray’s *Bangalir Itihas* (History of the Bengali People) in 1949 and it offered an altogether different approach. The textual knowledge was now situated within its political and economic contexts.

The rigors of the caste system, Ray argued, were not that strict in Bengal as they were in the heartland of the Aryan civilization. This was mainly because of the late beginning of the process of Aryanization and the simultaneous existence of a more liberal indigenous tribal culture, which constantly interacted with the orthodox *varna* culture and diluted it, even after the establishment of an Aryan state in the fifth century AD. The dominance of the Brahminical religion was further contested by Buddhism under such ruling dynasties as the Palas between the eighth and 12th centuries, the Kambojas in northern and eastern Bengal in the tenth century and the Chandras in eastern and southern Bengal between the tenth and 11th centuries. It was

the resurgence of Brahminism under the Sen-Barman hegemony in the 11th–13th centuries that led to the formalization of the *varna* social organization in Bengal, rigorously structured by a number of orthodox *smritikaras*, including the Sen king Ballala Sen himself, who is well known for introducing *kulinism* as another form of social differentiation (Kunal 2001). Kunal Chakrabarti has, however, shown more recently that the influence of Buddhism in Bengal was clearly declining since the eighth century, as the ascendancy of Brahminism was in the process of being firmly established since the post-Gupta period (Shanti 2005). In Bengal, the development of the first distinct Bengali Hinduism taking place during the rule of the Sen and Barman kings, has been described in the contemporary writings of Bhavadeva, Aniruddhabhatta, Ballalasen, Laksmansen, Gunavisnu, Halayudha etc., as well as in the Brihaddharma and Brahmavaivarta Puranas. To a large extent, they codified, formalized and made immutable some of the existing social structure and also making it very much more rigid.

### **The Shudras in ancient Bengal**

Apart from the Brahmins and the upper subcastes, the middle subcastes in ancient Bengal consisted of engravers (*taksana*), washermen (*rajaka*), goldsmiths (*svarnakara*), gold traders (*svarnavanika*), milkmen and cowherds (*abhira*), oil traders (*tailakaraka*), fish traders (*dhivara*), alcohol traders (*shaundika*), actors and magicians (*nata*), descendants of Buddhist leaders (*shekhara*), fishermen (*jalika*); possibly buffalo keepers arose from these later and another unidentifiable category (*shabaka*). The lowest subcaste (untouchables) consisted of cleaners (*malegrahi*), those that cremate the dead (*candala*), carpenters (*taksa*), leatherworker (*carmakara*), boatmen (*ghattajivi*), chair-bearers (*dolavahi*), wrestlers (*malla*) and two unidentified groups (*varui* and *kudava*). In addition are described the *mleccha* or foreign groups like *pukkasha*, *pulinda*, *khasa*, *thara*, *kanboja*, *yavana*, *sumha*, *shavara*, etc., who were left outside the entire classification. In contrast, *Brahmavaivarta Purana* mentions the top subcastes exemplified by *gopa*, *napita*, *bhilla*, *modaka*, *kuvara*, *tambuli*, *svarnakara* (later demoted), and *vanika*; followed by *karana* and *ambastha*. Then, of the nine sons of Vishvakarma (the Artisan-God) by a Shudra woman, six of them, namely *malakara*, *karmakara*, *shankhakara*, *kuvindaka*, *kumbhakara* and *kamsakara* are explained as being high, and *sutradhara* and *citrakara* are demoted. *Suvarnavanika* is also demoted because of association with *svarnakara*. After this, there is a long list of fallen subcastes including *attalikakra*, *kotaka*, *tvara*, *tailakara*, *leta*, *malla*, *carmakara*, *shundi*, *paundraka*, *mamsaccheda*, *rajaputra*, *kaivarta*, *rajaka*, *kauyali*, *gangaputra* and *yuggi*. The really low subcastes included *vyadha*, *bhada*, *kola*, *kojca*, *haddi*, *doma*, *jola*, *vagatata*, *vyalagrahi* and *candala*. Traditional stories try to explain the bizarre patterns with mythological stories: Thus, the goldsmiths claimed they were vaishyas who were insulted by Ballalasen who invited and placed them with the satshudras at dinner, and who, furthermore, borrowed a lot of money by force. When they tried to revolt against him, he lowered their status; and he further disallowed wearing of the sacred thread by the traders. Overall, however, the low position of the artisan class fit well with the agrarian turn at the beginning of the Pala period (Bhattacharya).

The rules developed in this period prescribe strict limits on Brahmins intermixing with the rest of the society. Some examples can be provided. They were not allowed to eat food cooked by Shudras, except for fried items, rice cooked in milk and in time of distress. However, they could not drink even water touched by the untouchables, neither could they be touched by untouchables. Elaborate rituals were needed to clean oneself of violations of these rules. Similarly, even though intermarriage between upper caste men and lower caste women was allowed, the normal rule was marriage within one's own caste. Rules made it clear that a wife of a lower caste had fewer rights than one of the same caste. Marriage rules for Brahmins, and possibly the upper category of Shudras, had to follow the endogamy/exogamy rules of *sapinda* (exogamy

for parts of an extended family), *sagotra* (exogamy for a group of paternally inherited markers called *gotra*) and *samanapravara* (exogamy outside related *gotras*). Marriage was also forbidden if it took place according to high ceremony and any of the seven male ancestors along the father's line and five along the mother's line coincided. Low marriage ceremony only required exclusion for five and three generations but pushed one to the Shudra caste. Even the *kayastha kulina* rules were complicated: The first three sons who married had to obey rules to stay in the caste, whereas the fourth (*madhyamsha dvitiya*), fifth (*kanisthya*) and the younger (*vamshaja*) ones had less rigid rules, as they were not considered as high in caste status they traditionally married elder maulikas. Thus, the marriage rules and rituals were meant to sustain the hierarchy of the society. Some relaxations were permitted for the prostitutes and also extra-marital relationships between Brahmin men and Shudra women were often overlooked (Sen 1989). Bhabadevabhatta's writings, Sandhyakarnandi's *Amaracarita* and poet Dhoyi's *Pavanaduta* had given contemporary evidence in support of the practice. During the tenth day of Durga puja, during the *Saradotsava* festival, men and women covered with mud and leaves would sing and dance to primal images, as described in the contemporary *Kalviveka* and slightly later *Kalikapurana*. Brihaddharmapurana seems to speak against it, unless the participants were followers of Shakti. Similar festivals during *Holaka* or *Holi* and *Kama-mahotsava* are also known. Poetry (e.g., Govardhana's *Arya saptashati*, Jaideb's *Gitagovindam*, etc.) also describe physical love across castes. Village society, however, often shunned many of these behaviors and considered them shameful (Sharma 2003).

Thus, we see that the chaturvarna caste structure of India was widened and proliferated in many ways in a diverse region like Bengal. The diversity also brought a kind of flexibility and different patterns of hegemonies as well as exploitation. We clearly see this in Bengal even today, with plenty of variations across different districts of Bengal.

### Caste in medieval Bengal: Impact of Islam

The coming of Islam could not bring any major change in the caste system in Bengal. In the 13th century, when Islam began to spread in the frontier regions of Bengal, as Richard Eaton has shown, peasants residing at the periphery of the varna society adopted it as the religion of the plough, rather than as an emancipatory ideology breaking the bonds of caste (Eaton 1993). The Muslim society in Bengal was graded into three groups, the *ashrafs* or the aristocratic gentry, the *atrafis* or the service gentry and the *ajalps* or the untouchables. Mukundaram Chakrabarti wrote in his *Mangalkavya*, *Chandimangal*, in the 16th century that the Muslims in Bengal were divided into 37 jatis or castes according to their professions. He referred to the *Jola* (weaver) and other artisan castes in Islam.<sup>14</sup>

### Protest movements in precolonial Bengal for caste equality

It can be stated that in the caste system, Islam brought a kind of rigor from above as well as a fluidity from below which was not found earlier. This was a peculiar situation in Bengal. Later, in the 15th century, the Bhakti movement led by Sri Chaitanya had a further corroding effect on the caste system. Chaitanyadeb (1486–1534), the leader of the Gaudiya Vaisnavas tried to eradicate caste barriers by preaching the principles of Bhakti through congregational music (*sankirtana*), verses like the *Astasataka* and other methods towards equality and unity.<sup>15</sup> Under his influence, cobblers like Sridhar Muchi and Muslims like Rup and Sanatan and Haridas adopted Vaisnavism. This movement had a significant impact on the contemporary society and a large amount of literature had been produced on it. Chaitanya had to face stiff resistance from the orthodox sections of the society. But unfortunately, after his death, once again, caste hierarchy

made a comeback in the form of Vaisnavism (Dimock 1964). The prominent Vaisnavas who had joined the movement with an upper-caste background, were gradually merged with the upper-caste Brahmins and came to be known as Goswamis, whereas the poorer lower caste Vaisnavas were clubbed together as *bostoms*, belonging essentially to the lower orders of the society. The advent of Vaisnavism in the Middle Ages also led essentially to a new caste called “Vaisnava” which was to be accommodated in the traditional society (O’Connell 2004). Partha Chatterjee’s *Subaltern Studies* article has discussed the theoretical implications of this subversive role of Bhakti (Chatterjee 1989), while Ramakanta Chakravarti’s research on Bengal Vaishnavism has shown how the ideology of Bhakti offered a “theological platform whereupon the highest and the lowest might stand with equal rights.” There had been a vigorous conservative attempt since the age of *Navyasmriti* (15th–16th century) to reinforce the discipline of caste. If under this influence the dominant Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition became more orthodox, there was also the rise, mainly in the 18th century, it also witnessed a rise as Chakravarti has chronicled, of various “deviant orders” or the Sahajiya Vaishnava cults under non-Brahmin gurus, who successfully questioned the ideology of hierarchy (Chakravarti 1985). Thus, the preachers of Bhakti and the sufis, the pirs and fakirs began to criticize caste in medieval Bengal. Among the lower orders, there was also the emergence of numerous sects and cults, known as the bauls and fakirs who started living outside the control of the caste-regulated village societies. We find names of leaders like Lalan Fakir (a contemporary of Rammohan Roy, i.e., mid-18th century), Balaram Hadi and Khushi Biswas, who welcomed Hindu and Muslim lower classes and castes to their distinct orders and spoke against caste inequalities and religious barriers. Lalan, for example, preached humanism and composed satirical oral songs against caste. “You can recognize a Brahman by his sacred thread, but how can you identify a lady Brahmani?” thus went one of the famous songs of Lalan Fakir, where both caste and gender inequalities were addressed in a wonderfully satirical manner. These leaders, themselves being poor and outcaste, had to face severe exploitation from the dominant orthodox sections of society. They were ostracized, excommunicated and often their assemblages were physically attacked, but they continued to have a considerable number of followers from the lower caste poor men and women of Bengal (Charabarti 2000). They did not have the power to overthrow the caste-based agrarian society of Bengal, but even today these people organize regular fairs and festivals of their own and their songs are very popular in the region.

Caste, culture and hegemony in pre-colonial Bengali society, in other words, was never so rigidly structured or hopelessly immobile as was textualized by some of the conservative medieval *smritikaras*, whom the British Orientalists studied so diligently (Bandyopadhyay 2004). The literary evidence of the *Mangalkavya*, pertaining to the 16th–18th centuries, would also bear this out. This literary evidence clearly shows that medieval Bengali society was segmented and hierarchized, but never strictly segregated. For example, the Chandalas, or the outcastes of traditional India, are described in the *Chandimangal* as the rightful dwellers of the city; they were not treated as *antebasi* or those who lived outside or at the edges of human habitation as enjoined by Manu.<sup>16</sup> The other aspect of the pre-colonial Bengali society, which Niharjan Ray’s study had conclusively shown, was that since the Gupta period, as a settled agricultural economy expanded in Bengal, the linkages between caste and class became more visible, with those providing physical labor losing status to those who refrained from it, but controlled land, such as the Brahmin, Kayastha and Baidya, the three traditional *uchchajati* (higher castes) of Bengal.<sup>17</sup> This secular aspect of caste formation was further developed in another seminal work, *Social Mobility in Bengal* by Hitesranjan Sanyal, in 1981. Sanyal showed how, as a result of occupational specialization, and not just ritual differentiation, subcastes were emerging in precolonial Bengal through a constant process of fusion and fission. This was a society that permitted occupational

mobility in keeping with the changes in the opportunity structure. Reclamation of forests and of new wastelands, technological innovations or commercial success resulted in social mobility that could be incorporated into the structure of the society. Although such subcastes “were knit together in a system of co-operation and inter-dependence,” Sanyal argued, the high ritual rank of the upper castes “was related to the material power and prosperity they represented” (Sanyal 1981). Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, the eminent scholar, writing on caste in Bengal, has remarked that Sanyal’s second argument about positive correlation between ritual rank and material power negates, however, his first argument about “co-operation and inter-dependence.”

If we take his first argument and look at the situation from below, then this “co-operation and inter-dependence” would appear as acts of subordination and compulsion, not of volition, and therefore products of specific relations of power (Sekhar 2004). This then brings us to the power aspect of this social institution of caste. Long before the much acclaimed “Hollow Crown” thesis was offered by Nicholas Dirks about the power of the pre-colonial kings, Ronald Inden had touched upon this subject in relation to the medieval Hindu chiefdoms in Bengal. In 1967, he had shown, on the basis of the evidence of the *Mangalkavya*, that the territorial chiefs or Rajas of Bengal and below them the *zamindars*, whose power was seldom restrained by interference from the central state, ruled over the *samajas* or the hierarchy of castes living within their territories (Ronald 1967). Inden further drew our attention to “the central role played by the king in maintaining proper order” in a caste society, where performance of the appropriate codes of conduct or *jatidharma* determined the rank of each group. Where deviations took place and new castes emerged through improper mixing of bodily substance, it was only the king, acting on the advice of the Brahmins, who could legitimize such a disorderly situation by accommodating the new groups into the hierarchy (Ronald 1976). Discipline and order in pre-colonial Bengali society were thus maintained through this power structure of the Raja–pundit nexus. The system continued into the early colonial period, when gradually it was replaced by its more modern variant, a new institution called *dal* (social factions), which S. N. Mukherjee has brought attention to. The *dals*, with their networks stretching from metropolitan Calcutta far into the interior of the province, performed the same functions of social control as the older *samajas*, with their reach now being regional, rather than local or territorial as in the olden days. Advised by knowledgeable pundits, the powerful *dalapatis* (leaders), many of whom were the wealthy *zamindars* or the new rich of Calcutta, exerted an informal but substantive control over the realms of caste rules and customary laws, the colonial courts seldom trying to arrogate this authority (Mukherjee 1977). Thus, caste was bought and sold in early colonial Calcutta, but this did not bring any vertical mobility in the system itself. It was a kind of monetization of caste, and the access to it was limited to the gentry only. A popular street doggerel of early Calcutta painted the picture in terms of change of surnames: “Dulal became Sarkar, Akrur became Dutta and I remain a Kaivarta (low caste) as usual?” As the colonial state tolerated such indigenous focuses of power, they continued until about the end of the 19th century. And then, only gradually, with the development of a capitalist economy, such networks of relationships started breaking down. British colonial policy and expansion of Western education gradually brought a distinctive change in the status of the backward classes in Bengal, in the form of empowerment and expansion of hierarchies in intra-caste levels.

### Nineteenth century Bengali intellectuals and caste

Bengal, in the 19th century, witnessed a cognitive revolution (Subrata 2007) which was manifested through the ideas and activities of many intellectuals like Rammohan Roy (1772–1833), Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820–91), Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) and many others. All

of them were critical of caste inequalities. Rammohan Roy founded the Brahmo movement (1828) which had theoretically practiced monotheism and anti-casteism in its social practices (Sophia 1988). The Brahmo movement had many contradictions, and it took a long time for the Brahmos to ignore caste regulations and the movement was too elitist in character to attract the artisan castes from below, but it was a good start. Many of the Derozians or early students at the Hindu college, founded in 1817, denounced their higher caste practices like wearing sacred threads in public. Those young students were undoubtedly alienated iconoclasts, but their work had an indirect impact (Susobhan 1971). Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, another social reformer, expressed his doubts about whether the poverty-stricken lower classes would find ways to attend schools at all, but as the principal of the Sanskrit College, he provided entry to the *nabasakhs* (nine artisan castes of the middle order) in the college, for the first time in the history of the institution (Asoke 1977). Vivekananda, the disciple of Sri Ramakrishna and the founder of the Ramakrishna Mission, similarly criticized caste as one of the many human institutions that bars the power of free thought and action of an individual. Caste or no caste, creed or no creed, any man, or class, or caste, or nation, or institution that bars the power of free thought and bars action of an individual is devilish and must go. Liberty of thought and action, asserted Vivekananda, is the only condition of life, of growth and of the human beings (Swami 2001). Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) wrote incessantly about a symbiosis, a oneness of the world with man, across caste and classes (Rabindranath 1996). These are only few instances from the life and thought of 19th century Bengal, where a section of the intelligentsia protested against caste barriers. In the early 20th century, severe attacks on casteism came from the pen of the famous novelist Saratchandra Chattopadhyay, in his works like *Bamunermeye* (A Brahmin's Daughter) and *Abhagir Swarga* (The Heaven of Abhagi, the Unfortunate).<sup>18</sup>

### **Leaders from within: A story of empowerment**

Upward social mobility among the lower castes was initiated with the spread of Western education. Colonial policies of social stratification for administrative requirement, and growth of political awareness among the Western-educated Bengalis including the lower castes, had stimulated their process of social awakening. The marginal groups adopted two major ideological strategies as a means of solution of their grievances. The first was the adoption of rituals and social practices from the upper caste Hindus in order to elevate their own status within the caste hierarchy. The second strategy was the formation of a fictitious caste identity with an alternative socio-cultural order. However, none of these strategies dared to challenge the rationality of the caste system. Still, apart from the upper-caste intellectuals, many lower caste leaders like Panchanan Barma (1865–1935), Thakur Harichand (1811–77) and his son Guru Chand Thakur in Bengal and a few other social reformers of late 19th and early 20th centuries had initiated social reforms among the lower castes. Education was considered by them as the primary tool for social development. Formation of social organizations (for example, the *Bratya Kshatriya Jatir Unnati Bidhayini Sabha*, set up by Panchanan Barma in Cooch Behar in North Bengal) and adoption of upper caste rituals were other common features in their social movement. The educated and landed class of these lower castes began to codify the history of their respective castes and reinterpreted certain common myths of their origins. In such writings, creation of a link with any mythological hero was a common trend in order to legitimize the demands for a respectable caste status.

These reforms naturally failed to uproot the basic sources of caste violence. The general picture of caste-ridden villages was changing rather too slowly. The growth of Calcutta as a new urban center led to slight relaxation in matters like inter-dining and taking of water

from taps or in taking of mill-made salt or sugar, but the general principles were very rigid. Though upper-caste surnames were bought by few notable members of the early bourgeoisie, caste rules remained very strict in Bengal throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. Personally, Rammohan Roy believed himself to be a Brahmin, wore the sacred thread and carried his Brahmin cook to England. It took a long time for the Brahmos to accept a non-Brahmin as the *Adhyaksha* or leader of the Brahmo movement. In fact, the Brahmo movement experienced schisms on the ground of these issues. The crisis deepened when the Brahmo Marriage Act was passed in 1872, which allowed inter-caste and widow marriage, but only if the contracting parties declared themselves to be non-Hindus. As a result, the Act never became popular in Bengal. Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar's reform movement to introduce widow remarriage in the mid-19th century failed in Bengal because of a popular fear of "losing caste." Not only did the reform fail, but by the beginning of the 20th century the prohibition on widow remarriage became more widespread among the Dalit and Backward Castes as a part of the process of Sanskritization. Actually, the issue of caste was not adequately addressed in the practical sphere of the cognitive revolution of 19th century Bengal; rather the process of Sanskritization was accelerated with the emergence of so-called Hindu nationalism by the end of the 19th century (Sen 1993).

### **British colonial policy towards caste**

Colonial rule disengaged the caste system from its precolonial political contexts and gave it a new lease of life by redefining and revitalizing it within its new structures of knowledge, institutions and policies. During the so-called non-interventionist phase of the early days, the British policy created new opportunities with the help of new property laws and the principle of equality before law, along with the theory of expansion of markets. At the same time, the company government did not consider promotion of education as its special duty. Later, when it decided to extend Western education to Indians, it was argued that "the circumstances existing in the country were not favorable to their taking definite action to elevate the Depressed classes by way of education." The Court of Directors through their dispatch sent in 1814 had ordered exclusion of Indian Christians, drawn mostly from the "untouchable castes," from certain offices such as of "munsiff," "vakil" and law officer in the Bengal Presidency, and also of "sudder ameen" (civil judge) and Cavalry in the Madras Presidency. The colonial policy thus reinforced the position of the privileged groups and only the higher castes with surplus resources, could take advantage of the new education.<sup>19</sup> The racially differentiated stereotypes and the scriptural dogma of caste were gradually legitimized by the official census classification of castes. British policies of divide-and-rule over India's numerous ethnic, religious and caste groups, as well as enumeration of the population into rigid categories during the ten-year census, particularly with the 1901 and 1911 census, contributed towards the hardening of caste identities.

Meanwhile, the Court of Directors, probably influenced by Macaulay's Minute of 1835, signaled a change of mind in a clarification issued to the Sheriff of Madras in 1846 by declaring that the government did not recognize caste, or any religious distinction as a ground of civil disability and all classes or castes alike were eligible to officers for which the head of an office might consider them qualified, and their employment advantageous to the public.<sup>20</sup> The Court of Directors in their dispatch of July 19, 1854, stated their intention to transmit "useful and practical knowledge" "to the great mass of the people who are utterly incapable of obtaining any education worthy of the name by their own unaided institutions."<sup>21</sup> Yet, the Department of Public Instruction set up in 1855–6, served only the upper castes who were keen on taking up employment in public service.

### **Muslims in colonial Bengal**

So far as Bengal was concerned, very scant data has been found on the history of the Other Backward Classes of the colonial period unlike in the case of groups separate from the Muslims or the Scheduled Castes like the Namasudras, who became prominent by their search for identity since the end of the 19th century.<sup>22</sup> Since many groups from among the Muslims were later graded in the list of the Other Backward Classes in post-independence India, the situation of the Muslims in colonial Bengal is worth noting. According to the census of 1872, the Muslims represented nearly half of the population in Bengal (49.2 percent) (Ahmed 1996). The Bengal Muslims were highly fragmented, vaguely united by a common allegiance to the essentials of the Islamic faith.<sup>23</sup> There were considerable economic differences within the Muslims, with a minority of large-landed magnates at the top (Urdu-speaking *ashrafs* and Bengali-speaking *atrafis*) and a majority of poor peasants and artisans (*ajalps*) at the bottom. The latter groups were totally backward, lacking in economic and educational status and the British policy of communal representation could not improve their status at all. In 1874–5, the Muslims constituted only 29 percent of the school-going population in Bengal as against 70.1 percent Hindus. They had an even lower share at the higher levels of education. In 1875, the Muslims represented 5.4 percent of college students, as against 93.9 percent Hindus, and only 1.5 percent of the Muslim literates had knowledge of English, compared with 4.4 percent among the Hindus. This poor representation was reflected in the employment situation too. In 1871, the Muslims constituted only 5.9 percent of the government officials in Bengal proper, while the Hindus accounted for 41 percent.<sup>24</sup> Offer of scholarships, arrangement for teaching Urdu and Persian in any high school, providing training to Muslim teachers, admission of Muslim students in government schools with half-fee concession were the hallmarks of government support to Muslims. That the educational arrangement of the British had not touched the lower classes of the province even by the last decade of the 19th century is clear from the report of the Director of Public Instruction (DPI) for the year:

The small number of children of the lowest castes reading in schools is deplorable and shows how true the statement is that the present educational system has hitherto failed to reach the lowest classes of the population, the very classes for which in Europe popular elementary education is more especially designed. The classes who were taking advantage of schools, public and private throughout the country are the well-to-do ... and not the masses of the labouring population.<sup>25</sup>

Notwithstanding Queen Victoria's proclamation of 1858 that all her "subjects, of whatever race or creed be freely and impartially admitted to office in our services, the duties of which they may be qualified by their education, ability, and integrity duly discharge," it was not translated into action until the Western-educated nationalists agitated for Indianization of the imperial services in the latter half of 19th century. The gradually implemented concept of Indianization of services did not help all the social groups alike since the practice of following hereditary occupations, and lack of awareness, made a vast majority of the people incapable of accessing modern education.

To estimate relative progress made by different communities, the government in 1881 directed the preparation of statistics showing the number of officials of various castes in state services of all the provinces. The statistics showed that there was real discrepancy between the higher and lower castes in terms of the official posts, but the problem could not be solved easily.

The Education Commission appointed in 1882, acting under pressure from missionary-educationists, dwelt at length on the social groups requiring special treatment, classifying them as Mussalmans, aborigines (Scheduled Tribes), untouchable low castes (Scheduled Castes), and poor classes. The Commission placed on record its view that while the aborigines, untouchable low castes and the poor classes had hardly any access to the indigenous system of education because of either deliberate exclusion or extreme poverty, their condition was not any better under the British dispensation either.<sup>26</sup> In Madras, the Commission made two important recommendations for the education of the low castes: 1) No boy could be refused admission to a government college or school merely on the ground of caste. 2) Generous support for the establishment of special schools or classes for children of low castes in places where a sufficient number of them are found to necessitate separate schools or classes, and where the schools already maintained from public funds do not provide adequately for their education.<sup>27</sup>

Though the School Fee Notification of 1884 had, for the first time, provided for collection of lower rates of fees from pupils of backward or indigent classes, this provision was enforced only selectively. Despite repeated representations for about two decades, the inspecting officers, collectors, DPI and the education department alike all refused to include the artisan castes in the list on the ground that artisans as a class were neither poor nor educationally backward.<sup>28</sup>

It was when the Royal Commission on public services instituted in 1912 to examine and report on the Indian participation in civil services visited Madras in 1913 and Calcutta in 1914 that the question of communal representation in state services was formally raised and publicly discussed for first time. The commission thoroughly investigated all aspects of the civil services, particularly the question of instituting simultaneous examinations in England and India. The holding of civil service examinations in India should have cheered every aspiring Indian since there were several difficulties in writing the examination in London. But the Muslims feared that this would pave way for Hindu domination and hence, the demand for communal representation in services was made for the first time. For the civil service, the occasion was used to stress the need for equitable distribution of important positions among members of the principal castes and creeds.<sup>29</sup>

For the education of Muslims, the Commission's recommendations were comprehensive. As for the poorer classes, the Commission drew a distinction between the claims of the poor for primary and for higher education and stated that "while it is the duty of the state to extend primary education as widely as possible, in secondary and collegiate education, the state is concerned only with boys of promise." Exemption of payment of fees in special schools and scholarships in well-established schools and colleges were the other two important recommendations of the Commission. The half-fee concession was extended to Muslims in all professional colleges in 1896 and the question of extending it to the backward or indigent classes was not raised and considered until 1908. It was with the introduction of these concessions since 1892 that the scramble for backward class status started.<sup>30</sup> The term "backward races" first appeared in 1883 reports of the DPI. In the following year appeared "backward or indigent races or castes," to provide lower rates of fees in special localities and special rates of fees for pupils belonging to backward or indigent classes.<sup>31</sup> Meanwhile, most of the petitions for inclusion in the backward classes list for educational concessions, especially after the introduction of the half-fee concession in 1892 had also urged for representation in public service. More often than not, the education department considered them favorably for inclusion in the list.<sup>32</sup> The term backward classes appeared in 1884 as a reference to aborigines and low castes. In 1909, the Board of Revenue instructed the Registrar of Cooperative Societies of all the provinces that "not more than one half of the total number of superior appointments in an office should ordinarily be held by

Brahmins, the other half being at least the due share of non-Brahmin Hindus, Indian Christians, Muhammadans, and Eurasians" (Dirks 2001).

Whatever be the motive behind the government's decision to undertake a census of population in the country, when caste became the basic unit to organize population counts, caste was politicized. Muslim politics remained caught in provincial dynamics, and their interests in Bengal, where they were a majority, was different from those of others in the minority provinces. For instance, in Bengal, the Krishak Praja Party under A. K. Fazlul Huq mobilized both lower-class Muslims and lower-caste Hindus on class demands and competed with the Muslim League for Muslim votes (Bandyopadhyay 2004). Their status today shows that they had not gained from the partition of the country.

On the other hand, voluntary caste associations emerged as a new phenomenon in public life, engaging in census-based caste movements, making petitions to census commissioners in support of their claims for higher ritual ranks in the official classification scheme. Caste associations sprang up to contest their assigned position in the official hierarchy, holding meetings, writing petitions and organizing protests. As the British could no longer ignore the political fallout of the census, they abandoned the use of caste for census counting altogether.<sup>33</sup> The social movements of the lower castes turned into a political movement with the adoption of the Government of India Act 1919. This Act had empowered the lower castes (who were now identified as Depressed Castes) to send their representatives to the provincial legislative councils and assemblies. Some lower caste organizations had contested the elections since the 1920s and were elected.

So, from the 1920s there were significant changes in the attitude of the government and upper-caste politicians towards the lower castes, who began to wield significant political power. The Indian National Congress began to fight for the causes of the untouchables, particularly under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. Also, B. R. Ambedkar (1891–1956) emerged as an all-India leader of the Depressed Castes. He took up the principle of Satyagraha and publicly burnt the *Manusmriti* which, according to him, was the main source of caste discrimination. At the same time, the appointment of the Simon Commission in 1927 and the Round Table Conferences (1932–4) led to the adoption of the Government of India Act in 1935, which had largely contributed to the growth of political consciousness among the lower castes. Already, in the Round Table conference held in August 1932, upon the request of Ambedkar, the then Prime Minister of Britain, Ramsay Macdonald, announced a Communal Award which awarded a provision for separate representation for the Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, Anglo-Indians, Europeans and Dalits. These depressed classes were assigned a number of seats to be filled by election from special constituencies in which only voters belonging to the depressed classes could vote. Gandhi went on a hunger strike against this provision claiming that such an arrangement would split the Hindu community into two groups. Fearing a communal reprisal and genocidal acts against untouchables, Ambedkar was coerced into agreeing with Gandhi. This agreement, which saw Gandhi end his fast and Ambedkar drop his demand for a separate electorate, was called the Poona Pact of 1932. Through this pact, the Depressed Castes got more reserved seats in the provincial legislative councils than the seats allotted through the Communal Award. In this way, the British policy of divide and rule, by creating a separate electorate from within the Hindus was challenged by the Congress and was eventually resolved. In order to control lower-caste politicians and voters, the Congress now began to pay more attention to them. Mahatma Gandhi expressed his genuine sympathy to the causes of the downtrodden and published articles in *Harijan* (English), *Harijan Bandhu* (Gujarati), and *Harijan Sevak* (Hindi). In Bengal, a number of organized temple entry movements like the Munshiganj Kali temple satyagraha in 1929, took place in the early 20th century and the

lower castes continuously challenged the domination of the upper castes and parted ways with the Congress.<sup>34</sup>

All these measures resulted in was a relatively greater disposal of wealth and power across caste lines. There were now larger discrepancies between caste-prescribed status and this limited social mobility led to several contradictory responses. The electoral politics from 1937 onwards had increased the factional politics among the Scheduled Castes. Thus, the Poona Pact was not the end. The Scheduled Castes were ultimately accorded a significant tool for their development. It was the policy of protective discrimination or reservation which was given legal shape by the Government of India Act 1935. This Act had initiated the development of the lower castes through the reservation of seats in educational institutions, public services and political spheres.

The general discriminatory policy of the government and the complexities of communal politics ultimately led to the partition of the country in 1947. The migration of backward classes from the newly created East Pakistan into West Bengal aggravated the problems of the marginal castes and classes, and rehabilitation was the immediate necessity before the provincial government of Bidhan Chandra Roy in the state of West Bengal in the independent India.

### **Politics of the depressed classes in Bengal: Peculiarities of the 20th century**

Bengal had the largest group of Hindu agriculturists in its eastern districts. Colonial rule, by opening up English education and creating some new opportunities in public employment and the professions, made the process of social mobility more widespread and perhaps relatively easier. What now became almost ubiquitous was a desire to move up the social ladder and to have that mobility legitimated through recognition in the decennial census reports. The colonial state not only encouraged such tendencies, but also actively helped the process through its policy of “protective discrimination.” Apart from questionable altruistic motives, it had a clear political agenda too. An increasingly unpopular colonial rule could easily be legitimized through the support of the lower castes<sup>35</sup> at a time when nationalism was in the grip of a powerful *bhadralok* elite, belonging primarily, but not exclusively, to the three traditional upper castes of Bengal.<sup>36</sup> Sekhar Bandyopadhyay’s pioneering case study on the Namashudras has also tried to develop this model. In this context, the Namashudras represented an important case, as they constituted a census-defined group in 1872, the second largest Hindu caste in colonial Bengal. These loosely organized people, who lived in varying material conditions and enjoyed differentiated ranks in different parts of the province, constructed a single caste identity through a protest movement in the late 19th century and demanded recognition of their new status. They remained alienated, more or less consistently, from nationalist politics till about the end of the 1930s. They opposed Gandhian nationalism and suspected his reformist remedy for untouchability. But then, around the time of the transfer of power and partition, their movement gradually disintegrated and merged into the other dominant political streams in the country represented by such organizations as the Congress, the Hindu Mahasabha and the Kisan Sabha.<sup>37</sup>

In fact, the fracturing of caste solidarities along class lines and the creation of competing and contesting religious national identities became a common problem with the marginal castes. Indeed, all other Scheduled Caste movements in Bengal experienced the same fissiparous tendencies towards the end of the colonial era: While the educated and more prosperous leaders preferred to join the Congress, the peasants either got involved in the Hindu Mahasabha campaign for the partition of the province and the creation of a greater Hindu homeland, or alternatively joined the Tebhaga movement under communist leadership.<sup>38</sup> In this situation, therefore,

apparently conflicting identities woven around caste, class, religion or nation, were locked in a complex cobweb of inter-relationship.

Two factors of differentiation and transience need to be taken into consideration while looking at any caste movement or its relationship with other identities and agitations. It is in the recognition of these two features and in the interrogation of the essentialism of caste that we may say a new trend in caste studies is emerging. Contrary to common assumptions, castes in colonial India were, often, very differentiated and caste movements usually resulted from convergence of various streams of consciousness, ambition for social climbing as well as protest, reflecting the plurality of the group. All these various sections within a “caste” had, however, one common aspiration, that of reworking the relations of power in society and polity. In their differing perceptions, they hoped to achieve this through divergent means, which ranged from constitutional agitation to direct action.

### **The leaders of the 20th century: Jogendranath Mandal**

A case study of a leader, Jogendranath Mandal, will clarify the contradictions and frustrations of the Scheduled Caste leadership in the 20th century. He was the leader of Scheduled Caste communities in Bengal. Born into an untouchable Namashudra family, Jogendranath passed his BA examination in 1932 from B. M. College in Barisal; then the law examination from the Calcutta Law College in 1934. He became a member of Bengal Legislative Assembly in 1937 for the Bakarganj North-East General Rural Constituency and won a surprise victory over Saral Kumar Datta, the heir-apparent of the high-caste political leader, Aswini Kumar Datta. In the Calcutta Corporation election of 1940, Mandal won Ward No. 3 (Reserved Seat) with the support of Congress and the Bose brothers (S. C. Bose and Sarat Bose). Subsequently, he developed political connections with Dr Ambedkar and also entered into a political alliance with the Muslim League. Jogendranath was initially appointed as the Minister for Co-operative Credit and Rural Indebtedness. In the meantime, he founded the Bengal branch of the All-India Scheduled Castes Federation (AISCF). He joined the Suhrawardy Ministry as the law minister in 1946.

Towards the end of 1946, Jogendranath almost single-handed ensured the election of Dr Ambedkar from Bengal to the constituent assembly. On the eve of the partition of India, Jogendranath Mandal supported H. Shaheed Suhrawardy, Sarat Chandra Bose and others for a United Bengal. With Mountbatten's announcement of the partition plan on June 3, 1947, however, he lent support for Pakistan on the understanding that the new state would safeguard the interests of both the Hindu and Muslim backward groups. Following the partition of India on August 15, 1947, Mandal became a member and temporary chairman of the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan and agreed to serve as the new state's first Minister for Law and Labor—becoming the highest-ranking Hindu member of the government. As leader of the Scheduled Castes, Jogendranath had made common cause with the Muslim League in their demand for Pakistan, hoping that the Scheduled Castes would benefit from it. From 1947 to 1950 he lived in the port city of Karachi, which was capital of Pakistan. However, having developed differences of opinion with Pakistani politicians over the disregarding the rights and future of minorities, and deviating from the vision of Pakistan's founder, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, he resigned from the cabinet in October 1950 submitting his resignation to Liaquat Ali Khan, the then Prime Minister of Pakistan, and returned to India. During the years from 1950 to 1968 he continued to fight for the rights of the under-privileged sections. He remained associated with Scheduled Caste Federation (SCF) under the leadership of Dr Ambedkar. He played a great role in filling the occasional

vacuums of leadership in the SCF due to Dr Ambedkar's deep engagement with the central government of India as the law minister. He inaugurated the school of political thought established by Dr Ambedkar in Mumbai. His failure to deal with the political situations in Pakistan exposes the frustrations of a leadership from the Scheduled Castes.

Jogendranath Mandal's post-1947 career as a refugee leader, Dalit activist, and failed aspirant to political power is of particular interest because he, arguably more than any other Bengali Dalit leader of the time, was at the forefront of caste radicalism in the late 1940s.<sup>39</sup> The premature death of Mahapran (Great Life) Jogendranath Mandal on October 5, 1968, at Bongaon of 24 Parganas District of West Bengal created a vacuum in the leadership of the backward classes in Bengal. It is also clear, for instance, that despite the ironic and utterly false culpability for partition that both caste Hindu and Dalit critics placed on him, all major parties were aware of his legitimacy in the eyes of vast numbers of Namasudra refugees from East Pakistan after 1950. Indeed, Mandal was closely involved with upper-caste communist and socialist leaders of the refugee movement in the latter part of the decade. He was certainly one of the crucial links between the leftist and upper-caste refugee leaders and Dalit refugees.

Jogendranath Mandal's advent in refugee politics was a major event. More than three-fourths of the refugees from East Bengal (Pakistan) were people of the Namasudra community. Mandal's influence over them was extraordinary. Outside the camps nearly 20 lakh Namasudras had come to Bengal, even they followed Mandal unreservedly. Among the refugee societies, two are paramount—the Praja Socialist Parth's Sara Bangla Bastuhara Sammelan and the Communists' and Forward Bloc's United Central Refugee Council or UCRC. With Mandal joining the Sara Bangla group, they began to hold satyagrahas. It was indeed he who gathered fodder for the satyagraha. His role in "gathering the fodder" for the refugee movements is significant both in terms of the well-known proposition that the left rose to power through mobilizing refugees, as well as because of the many considerable differences which developed between him and his socialist and communist comrades. Perhaps a crucial one concerned how they perceived the forced removal of almost exclusively Dalit refugees from the state of West Bengal, as the assurances of guaranteed rehabilitation by the departing colonial government withered away over the course of the decade.

The refugee movement began its first major wave of demonstrations against the proposals for rehabilitation elsewhere in India when the Congress government claimed to have hit a land ceiling, and thus unable to rehabilitate the swelling ranks of Dalit refugees from East Pakistan. According to reports, Mandal "has been spreading class and caste hatred openly in camps."<sup>40</sup> He "openly accused caste Hindu employees and caste Hindu people for sending refugee families to Madhya Pradesh outside West Bengal," and furthermore, accused the government of trying to make West Bengal into "a caste Hindu state."<sup>41</sup>

Clearly, for Mandal, the government's rehabilitation policies were discriminatory. The drive for the coerced dispersal of refugees outside West Bengal was fundamentally mediated by the fact they were Dalits. After Mandal died in 1968, a self-described "earnest follower," one Sri Dhirendranath Sarkar, wrote a pamphlet in his remembrance. Likely read out as an address, Sarkar's audience would have known Mandal as "our leader;" the writing intended then for a sympathetic Namasudra public. Addressing why Mandal's efforts for rehabilitation within West Bengal bore no fruition, he reasoned:

It did not happen precisely because of several conspiring Congress and Leftist leaders. This is a clear example of the effort to prevent the consolidation of the powerful Scheduled Caste refugees of East Bengal in West Bengal. Solely because of this, uprooting them, you've settled them in Bharat's distant mountains and forest areas in

the name of rehabilitation. This is the abominable rehabilitation pre-planned by several so-called caste Hindu political parties of Bengal.

At least some of the refugees with whom Mandal struggled thus looked upon their forced removal from West Bengal as determined by the fact that they were Dalits, while those who planned their relocation were caste Hindus. Jogendranath Mandal's failure to re-enter the world of legislative politics furnishes further evidence of the machinations of some to simultaneously capitalize on his appeal, and to also keep him outside the corridors of power. In Mandal's view, his political defeat was largely a consequence of the negative publicity generated about him, in particular his alleged responsibility for the partition of Bengal. Having found no other reason with which to accuse him, Mandal noted in his autobiography that he felt an unnamed "group of conspirators" attributed such false accusations to him because they "want to keep him entirely restrained." So much so that even circles within the Namasudra community held him accountable for partition and the horrors it brought in its wake.

### **Empowerment of the backward classes: General comments on the contemporary scenario after independence**

After independence, development of the socio-economic status of backward Indians through reservation and other means became special target of the Indian government. The Constitution of India, in its different articles has provided certain steps to give social justice to the backward communities. Article 14 of the constitution has clearly spoken in favor of a strict equality before law. Article 15 prohibits all kinds of discrimination based on caste; Article 16 has extended the matter of equality and equal opportunity especially in public employment and Article 17 declared the practice of untouchability to be illegal. Articles 330, 332, and 334 have provided the opportunity of reservation in the parliament and state legislative assemblies to the members of the backward communities. The constitution has also empowered the president of India to draw up a list of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes to give them the opportunity of reservation. The Government of India (Scheduled Castes) Order 1936 was modified in 1950 by another Order which was further reshaped by the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Lists Order, 1956. In 1955, India enacted the Untouchability (Offences) Act (renamed in 1976, as the Protection of Civil Rights Act). It extended the reach of the law, from intent to mandatory enforcement.

Besides the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and the Scheduled Tribes (STs), the Government of India had come forward to identify the other backward classes of India immediately after the adoption of the Constitution. The first Backward Classes Commission was appointed in 1953 under the chairmanship of Kaka Saheb Kalelkar. In its report of 1955, the Commission identified 2,399 communities as backward classes and recommended reservation (25–40 percent) in the government jobs. This report was however not accepted by the government. Another Backward Class Commission was appointed 24 years later, under the chairmanship of B. P. Mandal, in 1979, which submitted its recommendations in 1980. The Mandal Commission was established to "identify the socially or educationally backward" and to consider the question of seat reservations and quotas for people to redress caste discrimination. In 1980, the commission's report affirmed the affirmative action practice under Indian law, whereby additional members of lower castes—the other backward classes—were given exclusive access to another 27 percent of government jobs and seats in courses in public universities, in addition to the 23 percent already reserved for the SCs and STs. It estimated that the backward classes comprised 52 percent of the population and recommended 27 percent reservation of seats for them in academic institu-

tions and government jobs. Moreover, since the 1980s, caste had become a major issue in the politics of India. The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act was passed in India in 1989. When V. P. Singh's administration tried to implement the recommendations of the Mandal Commission in 1989, massive protests were held across the country. Many alleged that the politicians were trying to cash in on caste-based reservations for purely electoral purposes.

The Mandal Commission in 1980 drew up a list of 3,743 castes and categorized them as Other Backward Classes (OBCs). The Supreme Court, however, ruled that the total quantum of reservation under Articles 15(4) and 16(4) of the constitution should not be more than 50 percent, it fixed the quantum at 27 percent, taking into account the existing 22.5 percent for SCs and STs. Candidates belonging to the OBCs selected on the basis of merit in an open competition should not be adjusted against their reservation quota. Reservation should be made at the time of promotion as well. Unfilled quotas must be carried forward for three years.

The Commission recommended that the private sector should be obliged to emulate the government and public sector in this respect. For the general economic and occupational development of the OBCs, the Commission made several recommendations including the setting up of cooperative societies of occupational groups; the setting up of networks of financial and technical institutions to foster their business and industrial enterprises; the introduction of progressive land reforms; allotment of surplus lands to the OBCs; the setting up of institutions for providing financial and technical assistance to artisans and craftsmen for reviving traditional occupations. But the recommendations were put in cold storage.

The Mandal Commission thus covered more than 3,000 castes under the OBC category, regardless of their affluence or economic status and stated that OBCs form around 52 percent of the Indian population. However, the National Sample Survey puts the figure at 32 percent. There is substantial debate over the exact number of OBCs in India; it is generally estimated to be sizable, but many believe that it is lower than the figures quoted by the Mandal Commission and higher than those of the National Sample Survey.

### **Retrograde opposition**

The vociferous protest against reservation for OBCs and the growing unease about reservations for SCs and STs reflect the sharp conflicts which are erupting in Indian society over the distribution of a limited number of government jobs and educational resources. It should be noted that the vocal opposition to the reservations for OBCs goes hand-in-hand with a more disguised resentment against reservation for the SCs and STs. One has only to recall to the Gujarat anti-reservation movement of 1981 and the December 1989, UP agitation against the parliament extending the reservation of seats in legislatures for the SCs and STs by 10 years.

The movements against reservations in the present Indian context is definitely retrograde and serves the interests of those who seek to preserve the dominance of the upper castes. The plea against reservations is advanced on the basis of equality of opportunity and merit. In an unequal society like India, where the STs, SCs and Shudras (the bulk of whom are the OBCs) have been discriminated against in choice of occupation, social mobility and control over the means of production, all talk of equality, without taking into account this reality would force one to conclude that the upper castes want their hegemony to be continued and that they cannot tolerate the rise of those whom they consider inferior.

As for merit, it is perfectly possible in India to discriminate in recruitment and promotions, on the basis of caste prejudices or preferences, militating against merit. Further, merit, as the Mandal Commission and a host of other commissions and Supreme Court judgments have

pointed out, must be seen in the context of achieving real equality of opportunities, social environment and compensatory discrimination to ensure social justice.

Reservation for the OBCs has existed in many states for a long time. In the four southern states there has been some form of reservation from the pre-independence period. The other states where reservations exist in varying degrees are: Gujarat, Maharashtra, Bihar, UP, Punjab and Himachal Pradesh. In West Bengal, Orissa, Assam and most of the north-eastern states, such reservations do not exist due to the nature of the historical evolution of the caste pattern, and in West Bengal due to the major socio-economic changes which were brought about through prolonged movements. The political ascendancy of Islam since the 13th century was followed by the Bhakti movement in medieval times. In the modern period, the Bengal Congress, the left parties and the Naxalite movement were instrumental in stimulating, to an extent, anti-casteism. Also, caste movements from within were stronger in Bengal but these could not resolve the problem of caste inequality.

It is a fact that the bulk of those who are categorized as OBCs in the states belong to the rural poor. They are sharecroppers, small tenants or poor peasants with smallholdings. Further, in the rural areas the OBCs are in occupations which are still based on the traditional caste hierarchy such as dhobis, barbers, cattle-rearers and artisans. Their lowly caste status prevents their entry into education and new occupations. These are the facts confirmed by detailed studies conducted by the Havanur Commission in Karnataka (1975); the Backward Classes Commission in Tamil Nadu (1971); the Backward Classes Reservation Commission in Kerala (1971); the Socially and Educationally Backward Classes Commission in Gujarat (1976) and the Backward Classes Commission in Andhra Pradesh (1970); that within OBCs there are many subcastes which are educationally and economically backward, judged by a number of socio-economic indicators.

### **The position of the left government in West Bengal**

Therefore, where the caste status contributes to the backwardness of communities under the OBC category, and where anti-caste movements have not been able to cut across caste barriers and build powerful class-based mass organizations, there is a justification for providing reservations to such communities. This is the basis on which the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI (M)) supported the implementation of the Mandal Commission report since 1981–2 and earlier in states where due to prolonged movements the OBCs were accorded reservations.

The Government of West Bengal has, however, qualified this support on two counts.<sup>42</sup> Firstly, it has argued for an economic criterion within the reservation for OBCs. This is a demand distinct from the blanket reservation for the SCs and STs for which no economic criterion is necessary. Four decades of socio-economic developments and the growth of capitalism have led to class differentiation within the caste structures. In the case of OBCs, it is well-known that there are a few castes in different states which contain influential strata, which own land and other means of production. They are well represented in the political power structure also. The complexity of the OBC problem lies, thus, in the fact that within some communities of the OBCs there is a great economic (intra-caste) differentiation and also there is inter-caste differentiation, i.e., compared to a few better-off communities there are a number of more backward communities.

In order to ensure that the landless, as compared to the landed, the poor as compared to the affluent, the more backward as distinct from the strata of the developed, in other words, the majority of the poor and deprived of these communities benefit from reservation, the Government of West Bengal has called for an economic criterion. This criterion need not nec-

essarily be just an income ceiling but can be a package in which income tax assessments, extent of landholding, professional status of parents, etc., can be taken into consideration.

The concept of an economic criterion is not a new proposal. As early as 1958, the Administrative Reforms Committee in Kerala headed by E. M. S. Namboodiripad, Chief Minister, suggested such a criterion for backward classes reservation. The Nettoor Damodaran Commission report of 1971 also made a similar suggestion. The Justice Chinnappa Reddy Commission set up by the Karnataka government and which submitted its report in 1990, listed those among the OBCs who can be excluded from the OBC reservations: Those whose parents are income tax or sales tax assessed, hold land up to eight acres or are Class I officers. In Kerala, reservation in admissions to medical colleges is governed by an income criterion. Only those whose parents draw less than Rs20,000 per year are entitled to benefit from OBC reservation. In some other states like Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, there are two or three categories of backward classes, with the more backward either getting more fee concessions and other facilities or getting a greater quantum of reservations. The difficulty is that wherever OBC reservations already exist, the introduction of an economic criterion has met with strong resistance. Only when a broad consensus is reached can it be implemented. In Kerala, it has not been implemented so far as there is no such agreement. In the case of Bihar, when OBC reservations were being introduced for the first time in 1978, it was possible, after a destructive anti-reservation movement, to arrive at a formula which has been working since then. The 26 percent reservation consists of 12 percent of the most backward category listed in Annexure I; 8 percent for other backward classes listed in Annexure II with an income ceiling of Rs12,000 per annum; 3 percent for women and 3 percent for the poor of the forward castes. The proposal of the earlier government for additional reservation of 5–10 percent for those economically backward can be accepted provided that this is allotted to those who do not fall within the reserved categories. This may help in alleviating the fears of those economically deprived amongst the forward castes.

There is a second qualification with respect to OBC reservations. While the Government of West Bengal has been supporting the demand for the implementation of the Mandal Commission report, it has also been asking for a consensus to be evolved from the upper castes. Only by taking care to see that substantial sections are convinced on the justification and reasonableness of the scope of reservations can a divisive anti-reservation movement be avoided or limited.<sup>43</sup>

Anyway, after the rich and varied experience of OBC reservations in the states, it is clear that there has to be periodic reviews of the status of those on the reserved lists and for identification of those who continue to remain backward. Here, a good example is that of the Chinnappa Reddy Commission (the third such commission in Karnataka within 15 years) which has further defined the identification of backward status apart from keeping in mind the caste factor and computing other criteria along with it, such as access to education, economic status, occupation and employment pattern.

In West Bengal, since the last 20-odd years, the following Acts and Amendments have been passed to solve the problem of the OBCs.

1. West Bengal Commission for Backward Classes Act, 1993.<sup>44</sup>
2. West Bengal Commission for Backward Classes Rules, 1993.<sup>45</sup>
3. Amendments of West Bengal Commission of Backward Classes Act, 1993.<sup>46</sup>
4. Amendments of West Bengal Commission of Backward Classes Rules, 1993.<sup>47</sup>
5. West Bengal Commission of Backward Classes (Amendment) Act, 2007.<sup>48</sup>
6. West Bengal Commission of Backward Classes (Amendment) Act, 2010.<sup>49</sup>

*Source: Kolkata Gazette, Extraordinary, September 21, 2010.*

Through these acts, the rules for reservation of the OBCs in government jobs and offices like the School Service Commission and the College Service Commission have been revised and rescheduled. It is very difficult to ascertain the role of any particular lobby behind these amendments. In West Bengal, the so-called creamy layer or the educated section among the OBCs have a dominance in politics and decision-making.

### **Sample briefs on three OBC groups in West Bengal**

1. **Teli** is a caste traditionally occupied in the pressing of oil in India, Nepal and Pakistan. Members may be either Hindu or Muslim; Muslim Teli are called Roshandaar or Teli Malik. The Jewish community of Maharashtra (called Bene Israel) was also known to be a subgroup in the Teli case called Shanivar Teli meaning *Saturday oil pressers* for their Jewish custom of abstention from work on Shabbat. In the late 2000s, some among the Teli community of Bihar, organized by the Teli Sena, sought to be categorized as an “Extremely Backward Class” in the state. They did succeed, as of 2010, as several other groups opposed it arguing that the Teli population was too socio-economically influential to deserve that label.
2. **Baishya Kapalis** or Kapalis are a Bengali Hindu agricultural caste spread throughout West Bengal and Bangladesh. Minor populations are settled in Bihar, Jharkhand, Tripura, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Nepal, Assam and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. The Kapalis excel in the cultivation of jute and manufacture of gunny bags. The governments of India and West Bengal have both classified Kapalis and Baishya Kapalis as Other Backward Classes since 1994.
3. **The Karmakars** used to be blacksmiths and have produced engineering masterpieces. In the 17th century, Janardan Karmakar, gunsmith from Dhaka designed and built the world-famous Jahan Kosha Cannon, 5.5 meters long and weighing around 7 tonnes and still showing no signs of rust. Another grand cannon named the Dol Madol was built by the Karmakars in the 18th century in the kingdom of Bishnupur, in order to fend off the Maratha raids. In the late 18th century, Panchanan Karmakar pioneered the Bengali printing industry by inventing movable type punch-marked Bengali script. Over the course of time, Karmakars living in and around Kolkata, Dhaka and other smaller towns of Bengal took to other professions like goldsmiths, working with machines, trading, and so on. There are several Karmakars who are jewelers in the modern times and at the same time, in remote villages of West Bengal and Bangladesh, some Karmakars continue to practice their original trade of blacksmithing and are recognized as OBCs in Bengal.<sup>50</sup>

### **Towards a conclusion**

The author is in agreement with Dwaipayan Sen, who has argued that upper caste hegemony is still very strong in West Bengal and that the “liberalism” exceptionality of the state was more artificial than real. West Bengal’s political culture historically has been hostile to the very idea of Dalit political autonomy and differentiated citizenship.<sup>51</sup>

Since West Bengal has not seen caste-based mobilizations of the kind witnessed in Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh or Tamil Nadu, much less the centrality of caste-related issues in legislative politics, a fairly well-dispersed commonsense has developed that the state, somehow, was able to relieve itself of such “backward” attachments, and whatever animosities that existed in the past were dissolved by the exceptionality of Bengali society, be it the Congress paternalism which reigned shortly after 1947, or the supposed compact with the communist regimes

that followed. Dwaipayan Sen correctly locates the domination of this state's political, social and cultural domains by the upper castes even as it was surely proclaimed that caste did not matter. He finds a deliberate silencing of caste issues in West Bengal by upper-caste politicians. Since independence, caste in West Bengal, was dominant *with* hegemony, to which Dalits have seemingly meekly consented.<sup>52</sup> Sekhar Bandyopadhyay's recent emphasis on Dalit integration with Indian nationalism in post-colonial Bengal is also significant. He argues that the partition violence and refugee influx

led to a rephrasing of the idioms of victimhood and resistance, placing less emphasis on caste and focusing more on the predicament of displacement and the struggles of the refugees. These idioms could be more easily absorbed into the modern tropes of social justice deployed by the left-liberal ideologies of the state. Hence, while caste discrimination did not disappear, it was subsumed in a different idiom, marked by the dominant discourse of class and religion.<sup>53</sup>

Bandyopadhyay showed how in East Pakistan, Dalits who had not migrated prior to partition like many amongst the upper caste gentry, increasingly became the targets of anti-Hindu intimidation and harassment. The Congress and Mahasabha propagated acts of violence against them as evidence of the anti-Hindu policies of Pakistan.<sup>54</sup> Joya Chatterji has written about this violence in the post-Partition context, which led to retaliatory violence on Muslim minorities in West Bengal by Dalit refugees who had come from East Pakistan.<sup>55</sup> Bandyopadhyay, therefore, argued that caste mattered less in Bengal. It is true that from the 1950s onwards, Dalits were drawn to the rising communist tide over the course of the refugee movement which, it is argued, was able to channel their class-based grievances and retain their electoral loyalty. In particular, he asserts that there was no one story of how Dalits negotiated the Indian Republic. The recent rise of the importance of the Namasudra Matua sect (led by Baroma, Kapil Krishna Thakur and Manjul Krishna Thakur, interestingly, of the same family) in West Bengal politics and its novel engagement with both contemporary power blocs show that theirs is a story of "Dalit agency and empowerment" in contrast to the anti-Hinduism and minoritarianism of mainstream Dalit politics. However, Partha Chatterjee claims that it is "unclear that this represents a political resurgence of caste in Bengal politics."<sup>56</sup>

Chatterjee's explanations for the "absence of caste articulation of organized political demands" include the social-structural, emphasizing the complete dominance and preponderance of the upper castes in the capital, Calcutta, in particular, largely cut off from substantial ties to the land. His point is that their overwhelming dominance in the city, which exerted a disproportionate influence over the rest of the province, consigned them in a sense, to this role. He located the dominance of the upper-caste intelligentsia in the leading roles in every contending party. There was also a kind of Dalit collaboration in this entire process of the exercise of power.

The caste Hindus of West Bengal actively sought their domination of the state's political, social and cultural resources. The history of reservation policy in West Bengal is a subject that, unsurprisingly, has received negligible commentary thus far. Barring scan official data—the typical non-accumulation of which is itself constitutive of the micro-techniques of caste prejudice—we have little examination of how and why caste Hindus so strenuously refused to give full effect to constitutional fiat. What is clear is that from the very first days of the Republic, West Bengal's caste elites have consistently expressed their distaste for the exceptional provisions of differentiated citizenship.

At the same time, there is also the story of a gradual empowerment from below. There is no one story of how Dalits negotiated the Indian Republic. Notwithstanding a hierarchy within,

the picture is changing, slowly and gradually. The pace of globalization has accelerated the change. But reservations for the OBCs have come to stay. The social and political implications of the aspirations of those downtrodden in Indian society, has been with us before independence and since too.

An aspect of the prolonged struggle against upper-caste domination was the non-Brahmin movements in the south and in Maharashtra for well over a century. In the north, the anti-caste social reform movements had a belated start. Bihar saw this phenomenon earlier than in other eastern Indian states. In the pre-independence period, these anti-caste movements spearheaded the fight against the upper-caste domination. Their main weakness lay in their alienation from the anti-imperialist movement, a feature due also to the approach of the dominant politics of the time. They sought to fight caste domination not by advocating a thorough-going economic upheaval which could have altered the relations of production in agriculture, but by an upper-caste approach of reformism, both before and after independence, with its entire reliance on preaching against untouchability by inter-caste dining, inter-caste marriages and of course reservations. These are important symbols, only when we support these agendas with a well-organized program of economic reform. This applies to West Bengal as well, as there is a tacit spirit of upper casteism everywhere in this state. The difference between West Bengal and many other states lies not in the kind of caste differences, but in the degree of it. Even today, sweepers of lower castes (who are in this profession because of their caste/class?) are not allowed to even clean the toilets of many upper caste houses in West Bengal. There is still a long way to go before equality of all becomes a reality.

## **Annexure I**

### ***List of Other Backward Classes from the Official Website of the Government of West Bengal, 2011***

1. Abdal 1 Baishya Kapali
2. Baidya Muslim 2 Bansi-Barman
3. Basni/Bosni 3 Barujibi, Barui
4. Beldar Muslim 4 Betkar (Bentkar)
5. Bepari/Byapari Muslim 5 Bhar
6. Bhatia Muslim 6 Bharbhija
7. Bhatiyara 7 Bhujel
8. Chowduli 8 Bungchheng
9. Chutor Mistri 9 Chasatti (Chasa)
10. Dafadar 10 Chitrakar
11. Dhukre 11 Christians converted from SC
12. Dhunia 12 Devanga
13. Fakir/Sain 13 Dewan
14. Gayen 14 Dhimal
15. Ghosi 15 Gangot
16. Hajjam 16 Goala-Gope
17. Hawari 17 Hele/Halia/Chasi-Kaibartta
18. Jamadar 18 Kahar
19. Jolah (Ansari-Momin) 19 Kansari
20. Kalander 20 Kapali
21. Kan 21 Karani

22. Kasai 22 Karmakar
23. Khotta Muslim 23 Keori/Koiri
24. Laskar 24 Khen
25. Mahaldar 25 Kumbhakar/Kumar
26. Majhi/Patni Muslim 26 Kurmi
27. Mal Muslim 27 Malakar
28. Mallick 28 Mangar
29. Midde 29 Moira-Midak (Halwai)
30. Molla 30 Nagar
31. Muchi/Chamar Muslim 31 Napit
32. Muslim Barujibi/Barui 32 Nembang
33. Muslim Biswas 33 Newar
34. Muslim Halder 34 Rai (including Chamling)
35. Muslim Mali 35 Raju
36. Muslim Mandal 36 Sampang
37. Muslim Piyada 37 Sarak
38. Muslim Sanpui/Sapui 38 Satchasi
39. Nasya-Sekh 39 Shankakar
40. Nehariya 40 Sunuwar
41. Nikari 41 Sutradhar
42. Patidar 42 Swarnakar
43. Penchi 43 Tamboli/Tamali
44. Rajmistri 44 Tanti, Tantubaya
45. Rayeen/Kunjra 45 Teli, Kolu
46. Sardar 46 Thami
47. Shershabadia 47 Turha
48. Siuli (Muslim) 48 Yogi-Nath
49. Tutia 49 Darji/Ostagar/Idrishi
50. Dhanuk 50 Dhali (Muslim)
51. Jogi 51 Pahadia (Muslim)
52. Khandait 52 Ptal-Pakha Benia
53. Kosta/Kostha
54. Lakhera/Laahera
55. Roniwar
56. Sukli

***Category – B DON'T UNDERSTAND THIS BUT ..***

**More Backward (AMONG) THE Backward THIS IS UNDERSTANDABLE**

Further Inclusion:

57. Bhangi (Muslim)
58. Dhatri/Dai/Dhaity (Muslim)
59. Gharami (Muslim)
60. Ghorkhan
61. Goldar/Golder (Muslim)
62. Halsana (Muslim)

63. Kayal (Muslim)
64. Naiya (Muslim)
65. Shikari/Sikari (Muslim)
66. Adaldar (Muslim)
67. Akunji/Akan/Akhan (Muslim)
68. Bag (Muslim)
69. Chaprashi (Muslim)
70. Churihar
71. Daptari (Muslim)
72. Dewan (Muslim)
73. Dhabak (Muslim)
74. Gazi (Muslim)
75. Khan (Muslim)
76. Kolu Muslim (Shah, Sahaji, Sadhukhan, Mondal)
77. Majhi
78. Malita/Malitha/Malitya (Muslim)
79. Mistri (Muslim)
80. Paik (Muslim)
81. Pailan (Muslim)
82. Purkait (Muslim)
83. Sana (Muslim)
84. Sareng (Muslim)
85. Sardar (Muslim)
86. Sarkar (Muslim)
87. Shah (Fakir)/Shah/Shah/Sahaji)
88. Tarafdar (Muslim)
89. Gavara
90. Mouli (Muslim)
91. Sepai (Muslim)

### Notes

- 1 For details, see Srinivas, M. N., 1966. *Social Change in Modern India*. Bombay: Allied Publishers; Beteille, A., 1978. *Society and Politics in India: Essays in Comparative Perspective*; Stokes, E., 1978. *The Peasant and the Raj: Studies in Agrarian Society and Peasant Rebellion in Colonial India*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 20–3. Jaiswal, S., 2000. Caste, Origin, Function and Dimensions of Change, New Delhi: Manohar.
- 2 Bandyopadhyay S., Op. cit. Introduction.
- 3 Leach E. R., Op. cit.
- 4 For details, see Bose, N.K., 1975. *The structure of Hindu society*. Translated from Bengali by Andre Beteille. Also, R. Kothari, ed., 2010. *Caste in Indian politics*, Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan.
- 5 For a further discussion on the colonial ethnological discourses see, Bandyopadhyay, S., 2004. Caste culture and hegemony in colonial Bengal, New Delhi: Sage, 11–39.
- 6 Also, Cohn, B.S., 1968. Notes on the History of the Study of Indian Society and Culture. In: M. Singer and B. S. Cohn, eds., *Structure and Change in Indian Society*; Mani, L., 1990. Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India; Chakravarti, U., 1990. Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi? Orientalism, Nationalism and a Script for the Past; both articles In: K. Sangari and S. Vaid, eds, *Recasting Women*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press.
- 7 Mencher, J., 1974. The caste system upside down, or the not-so-mysterious east. *Current Anthropology*, 15; Meillasoux, C., 1973. Are There Castes in India? *Economy and Society*, 3; Patil, S., 1979. Caste and Class. *Economic and Political Weekly*.

- 8 Ibid., 13.
- 9 Nicholas Dirks wrote, “Rather, I will argue that caste (again, as we know it today) is a modern phenomenon, that it is, specifically, the product of an historical encounter between India and Western colonial rule. By this I do not mean to imply that it was simply invented by the too clever British, now credited with so many imperial patents that what began as colonial critique has turned into another form of imperial adulation. But I am suggesting that it was under the British that ‘caste’ became a single term capable of expressing, organizing, and above all ‘systematizing’ India’s diverse forms of social identity, community, and organization. This was achieved through an identifiable (if contested) ideological canon as the result of a concrete encounter with colonial modernity during two hundred years of British domination. In short, colonialism made caste what it is today.” Dirks, N., 2006. *The scandal of empire*, Harvard: Harvard University Press, 27.
- 10 For details see, Ray, N., 1962. *Bangalir Itihas Adi Parba* (in Bengali), Vol. I, 1949, reprint, Kolkata: New Age Publishers, 277–80, 296–306; This book is now available in English *History of the Bengali People*, translated by John W. Hood, Orient Blackswan, Kolkata, February, 2013.
- 11 Ibid., p.32.
- 12 Large parts of Buchanan Hamilton’s report later appeared in Martin, M. R., 2012. *History, Antiquities, Topography and Statistics of Eastern India*, 1st edition. W. H. Allen and Co., 1838, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Sherring, M.A., 1872. *Hindu Tribes and Castes*. 3 vols; London: Thacker Spink and Co.; Hunter, W.W. 1877. *A Statistical Account of Bengal*. 6 vols, London: Trubner and Co; Wise, J., 1883. *Notes on the Races, Castes and Trades of Eastern Bengal*. London: Harrison and Sons; Risley, H. H., 1891. *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, 2 vols; Hutton, J. H., 1969. *Caste in India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press; O’Malley, L. S. S., 1976. *Indian Caste Customs*; A critical study of this colonial ethnography may be found in Bernard Cohn, Census, Social Structure and Objectification in South Asia, In: *An Anthropologist Among the Historians and Other Essays*, London: Oxford University Press.
- 13 This comes out very clearly in Sekhar Bandyopadhyay’s study of Risley’s field reports. See Bandyopadhyay, S., 1997. *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India: The Namasudras of Bengal, 1872–1947*, Richmond Surrey, 16–33. Ray, N., 1962. *Bangalir Itihas, Adi Parba*, (in Bengali) Vol. I, Kolkata: New Age Publishers, 296–306; this book is now available in English *History of the Bengali People*, translated by John W. Hood, Kolkata: Orient Blackswan.
- 14 See for example, *Chandimangal* (in Bengali), written in the 16th century by Mukundaram Chakrabarti, 1975. Originally published by Ramajay Vidyasagar from Vishvanath Dev’s Printing Press, edited by Sukumar Sen, New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi.
- 15 See Kumar S. D., 1962. *Early history of the vaisnava faith and movement in Bengal*, Kolkata: Firma K. L. M; Rosen, S., 1988. *India’s spiritual renaissance: the life and times of sri Chaitanya*, New Delhi: Folk Books; The English translations of the contemporary works on Chaitanya, like Krishnadas Kaviraj, Chaitanya Charitamrita, Brindabandas, Chaitanya Bhagvata are now available.
- 16 See for example, Mukundaram, *Chandimangal*, 1975. Sukumar Sen New Delhi: Sahitya Academy, 77–81; Vijaya Gupta, *Manasamangal*, edited by Basanta Kumar Bhattacharya Kolkata, 4, 59–61; Bharatchandra, *Anandamangal* Kolkata, (1369 Bengali year), 1962. In: B. Bandyopadhyay and S. Das, eds, 1944. *Bharatchandra Granthabali*, 3rd edition, Kolkata: Bangiya Sahitya Parishad, 170–71.
- 17 Ray, N., *Bangalir Itihas*, Op. cit., 324–25.
- 18 Sarat, C. C., published these works in 1930s.
- 19 *Public Despatches from England to Fort William*, No 8, February 2, 1831. See also *Public Consultations*, Vol. 618, January 24, 1834.
- 20 *Proceedings of Board of Revenue*, April 21, 1845, and April 23, 1846. See also P. Radhakrishnan, “Backward Classes in Tamil Nadu,” 1872–1988, *Working Paper No. 89*. Chennai: Madras Institute of Development Studies, March 1989, 2–3.
- 21 *Proceedings of Board of Revenue, 19th July, 1854*. For Details, see P. Radhakrishnan, Op. cit.
- 22 Namasudras of Bengal present a curious case. From being the largest Hindu caste group in Bengal and a census-defined community in 1872, they disintegrated after the partition of India in 1947. Under the banner of the Matua Mahasangha, the group has assumed political significance, again, in West Bengal’s embattled political arena in present times.
- 23 Ahmed, ibid., 1–2.
- 24 Ahmed, ibid., 135–1184, 153.
- 25 Radhakrishnan, P, Op. cit. 12–14.
- 26 For details see, *Hundred Years of the University of Calcutta*, Kolkata, 1957, 132–43.
- 27 Radhakrishnan, P, Backward classes in Tamil Nadu, Op. cit., 14–15.

- 28 GO nos. 386 & 387, Education department, dated July 27, 1887. For Details, see P. Radhakrishnan, Op. cit.
- 29 Royal commission on public service in India, 1913, Madras: Oral Evidence and Examination of Witnesses, 303.
- 30 GO nos. 386 & 387, Education Department, July 27, 1887.
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- 32 Proceedings of the board of revenue, November 10, 1909, GO no. 23357 Revenue Department, July 16, 1910.
- 33 Bandyopadhyay, S., ibid., 342–58.
- 34 Bandyopadhyay, S., Ibid., 345.
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## PART III

# OBC development and policies

The policy of reservation has yielded small gains to marginalized people but the politics of reservation has moved the agenda away from emancipation from caste-bondage. In reality, this perfunctory measure of positive discrimination has been effectively deployed to divert the trajectory of the struggles of the people against caste.

Implementation of development policies for marginalized people has been perfunctory. For instance, in Gujarat, which has been projected as a “model of development,” the state’s achievements in employment, poverty alleviation and human development have been limited. In Uttar Pradesh, the governments headed by the Samajwadi and Bahujan Samaj parties did bring about awareness and greater participation in politics by the OBCs and Dalits, but they also pitted the oppressed people against each other. The lives of the artisanal castes in the former undivided Andhra Pradesh have remained unchanged due to a lack of political will and commitment. While policy initiatives have been taken for the development of the artisanal castes, they were meant only for political gains.

One of the most backward communities is that of the OBC Muslims who comprise 41 percent of the Muslim population and 16 percent of the OBC population. This prompted government-appointed commissions to recommend a separate quota for them in the 27 percent reservation for OBCs whose implementation is lagging. Indian Muslims are passing through hard times with a right-wing government and its politics trying to alienate and isolate them from the country’s mainstream.

The OBCs remain the most dominant social group with more than one-third share in the overall electorate of North India and close to half in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. The Bharatiya Janata Party tried to counter “Mandal” through “*Kamandal*” (Hindutva), to garner support from OBCs in the name of religion. While the Mandal movement threw up leaders who made changes to the political discourse in North Indian politics, they have been now pushed aside by the rise of “*Kamandal*” politics.

Those who have remained on the sidelines despite both these movements are the OBC women. Within backward communities, the situation of women of these communities is worse in every social and economic indicator. The OBC woman is unequal in her home, leading an insecure and precarious existence.

Similar insecurity and precariousness mark the lives of the De-notified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Tribes. For all purposes they are nonexistent in the eyes of society and the govern-

ment. They remain the most excluded people, escaping the attention of even the mass media. But the Indian media have failed to live up to its traditional role of watchdog of society partly due to the privileged castes owning the media and partly due to the positions of power in the media monopolized by the upper castes. Both the English and Telugu media give very little coverage to the issues of marginalized people.

# 20

## CONTEXTUALIZING THE BACKWARD CLASSES DISCOURSE

*G. Aloysius*

### Introduction

#### *Constitutional provisions*

The term “backward classes” and the discourses surrounding it are basically legal and administrative in nature, deriving from and elaborated upon the references and provisions to be found in the Constitution of India. These, indeed, as has been noted by many a scholar, are scanty, perfunctory and scattered. The very first reference to the term is in the Article 15(4) of the Part III on *Fundamental Rights*: “Nothing in this Article or clause (2) of Article 29 shall prevent the State from making any *special provision* for the advancement of any socially and economically backward classes of citizens or for the Scheduled Castes or Scheduled Tribes.” (Introduced through Constitutional Amendment 1951.) And in the next clause of the same Article, 15(5), the statute lays down more specifically,

Nothing in this Article or sub-clause (g) of clause (1) of Article 19, shall prevent the State from making any provision, by law, for the advancement of any socially and educationally backward classes of citizens or for the Scheduled Castes or Scheduled Tribes in so far as such special provisions, relate to their *admission to educational institutions* including private educational institutions, whether aided or unaided by the State, other than the minority educational institutions referred to in clause (1) of Article 30. (Introduced through Constitutional Amendment 2005.)

And again, in the next Article 16(4), speaking of equality of opportunity and non-discrimination in employments of the state, the Constitution says, “Nothing in this article shall prevent the State from making any provision for the *reservation of appointments or posts* in favour of any backward class of citizens, which in the opinion of the State is not adequately represented in the services under the State.” Thus, the section on Fundamental Rights provides for an *exception* enabling the state to act generally in favor of the Backward Classes and also concerning *admission* to educational institutions and government *employment*.

The “Backward Classes” figure once again but indirectly as weaker sections, in Article 46 of the non-justiciable Part IV on *Directive Principles on State Policy*. As a mandate to the state the article states, “The State shall promote with special care the *educational and economic interests*

of the weaker sections of the people and in particular of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes and shall protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation.” Part IX on *The Panchayats*, in article 243(D), subclause 6 states: “Nothing in this Part shall prevent the Legislature of a State from making any provision for *reservation of seats* in any Panchayat or offices of Chairpersons in the Panchayats at any level in favour of backward class of citizens.” (Introduced through Constitutional Amendment 1992.) Similarly, in Part IXA *The Municipalities*, Article 243(T) subclause 6 provides, “Nothing in this Part shall prevent the Legislature of a State from making any provision for *reservation of seats* in any Municipality or offices of Chairpersons in the Municipalities in favour of backward class of citizens.” And the Part XVI on *Special Provisions Relating to Certain Classes*, Article 338 providing for a National Commission on Scheduled Castes, in its subclause 10, says, “In this article references to the Scheduled Castes shall be construed as including references to such other backward classes as the President may on receipt of the report of a Commission appointed under clause 1 of Article 340 by order specify and also to the Anglo-Indian community.” (Introduced through Constitutional Amendment 2003.) And finally, the Constitution provides as follows in article 340:

- (1) The President may, by order, appoint a Commission consisting of such persons as he thinks fit to investigate the conditions of socially and educationally backward classes within the territory of India and the difficulties under which they labour, and to make recommendations as to the steps that should be taken by the Union or any State to remove such difficulties and to improve their condition, and as to the grants that should be made for the purpose by the Union or any State and the conditions subject to which such grants should be made, and the order appointing such Commission shall define the procedure to be followed by the Commission; (2) A Commission so appointed shall investigate the matters referred to them and present to the President a report setting out the facts as found by them and making such recommendations as they think proper; (3) The President shall cause a copy of the report so presented together with a memorandum explaining the action taken thereon, to be laid before each house of Parliament.<sup>1</sup>

While several of the issues implied in and raised by these provisions will be taken up for discussion later, it is necessary to point out at the outset, that what strikes one is the scantiness and perfunctory nature of the provisions concerning the backward classes introduced mostly through subsequent amendments. Even these meagre constitutional provisions, we are told, are ambiguous, that is, apart from no definition of the term forthcoming, there are two meanings in which the term is used in the statute book: One, a broad one, referring to all castes and classes of people, which the constitution-makers in their wisdom thought as requiring special consideration by the state; two, a narrow one, a sort of technical meaning referring only to those who are known today as the *Other Backward Classes*, and that the two meanings cannot always be disentangled easily. It has also been noted that some sort of vagueness pervades these provisions referring to these classes, and this vagueness, if cannot be attributed to deliberate intention, could at least be read as a result of an evasiveness, shying away from grappling with the highly contested issues.

It should be noted further that *all* the provisions which clearly speak of the Other Backward Classes, with the exception of Article 340 providing for a commission “to be appointed later,” were introduced into the statute book by way of subsequent amendments. The original constitution had only Article 340, with which the makers of the statute clearly sought to summarily dispose of the presumably troublesome issues concerning the Other Backward Classes to a later period. A clear unwillingness to go into the related issues could be detected even while the

august body of the nation-to-be was engaged in the seemingly all-important task of constitution-making. It was thought, we are told, that issues relating to the Other Backward Classes were different from region to region and, therefore, are proper subjects for the provincial states and not the sovereign state of India. Finally, even in its broader meaning, the provisions referring to the backward classes are always expressed in the negative, as exceptional provisos, concessions and by implication, temporary that could not be avoided, and discretionary that could be evaded. More importantly, these provisions are merely enabling the state and they carefully refrain from investing any rights in the backward classes themselves! The implications of these initial considerations will be taken up subsequently.<sup>2</sup>

### ***Constitutional commissions***

The constitution of independent India was adopted on November 26, 1949, and came into force on January 26, 1950. After the elapse of three years, the first National Backward Classes Commission (known as Kaka Kalelkar Commission) was appointed in 1953 in accordance with Article 340 of the constitution. The Commission submitted its report after two years in 1955, recommending that *castes and their location in the Brahminical hierarchy* be considered as the most important criteria of backwardness, thus including some 2,399 castes in the list of Backward Classes and suggesting that as much as 70 percent of the government positions, be reserved for this category. This, of course, did not find favor with the then official ideology and the report was summarily rejected through a memorandum by the Home Ministry. The nationalist and ruling Congress Party must have felt the satisfaction of having fulfilled a somewhat uncomfortable constitutional obligation, for we do not hear anything on the matter till the Janata Party, a coalition of various splinter opposition groups but dominated by erstwhile socialists, came to power and appointed a second commission in 1979, after nearly three decades, known as the Mandal Commission. This Commission submitted its report towards the end of 1980, with the finding that 54 percent of the population comprising some 3,743 castes deserve to be classified as backward but suggested only 27 percent of the posts to be reserved for this category in compliance with the 50 percent limitation imposed on “all exceptions” by the apex court. Though this Commission had also retained the caste criterion, it had attenuated it greatly as those groups “considered as socially backward by others;” it had also developed other supplementary criteria to determine backwardness in order to avoid the inevitable and considered undesirable sharp focus on caste. However, with the demise of the Janata Party, the report was promptly forgotten by the Congress Party that returned to power. The report was revived in 1989 when the resurgence of the opposition returned a new coalition under V. P. Singh. Under various constraints and pressures, he sought to implement the contentious report on the backward classes, a solid four decades after the adoption of the constitution. This implementation cannot be said to have been completed even to this day, as controversies abound at the judicial, executive and legislative levels and clashes among the various groups of stakeholders continue on the ground. In 1993, the Supreme Court intervened, presumably as a disciplinary measure, and the central government passed the National Commission for Backward Classes Act, thereby setting up a permanent statutory body in the manner of the Commissions for the Scheduled Castes and Tribes.<sup>3</sup>

Again, one is constrained to note at the outset, the scanty as well as perfunctory nature of the state activities that have taken place in lieu of Article 340 of the constitution in the course of more than seven decades of the life of this independent and sovereign nation. We have on hand one briskly discarded report of a commission, and after a long silence of four decades, another that came in for implementation as though by default and through presumably extraneous political compulsions. And again, what little did take place, it must be noted, was the result of

the activities not of the pre-eminent nationalist class or party—the Indian National Congress—which led the independence movement, set the ideological tone of the society, took up the responsibility for setting up the state, and remained as the overweening power at the center most of the time. These were, on the other hand, the result mostly of the activities of the “opposition,” a coalition of groups mostly of the “backward or non-Brahmin classes” themselves, led by the erstwhile and fragmented groups of socialists; and these held power in very short and intermittent periods only.

Here again, as we noted earlier in the case of inscribing provisions in the statute book, we can legitimately infer a discomfort, hesitation and unwillingness on the part of the dominant and determining political formation of the country, to be drawn into the matter. This could also be inferred from the fact, that the site of almost obsessive activity around this issue has shifted to the judiciary, where the scope for conversation, contestation and compromise is severely limited. Such a reading of events and non-events would certainly be confirmed by the ever-volatile situation on the ground on this issue of apportioning some share in the power system for the masses of people.

However, these scanty provisions, long silences, hesitant undertakings and tentative and, at times, contradictory moves, when viewed non-contextually or in isolation of all that have been happening around, are likely to be interpreted as proactive and even progressive moves on the part of the centralized state. But, when they are contextualized on the other hand, in the overall and larger socio-political processes of more than two centuries, they would take on a different color, meaning and trajectory. They could easily be seen as basically reactions, and their consequences as disciplining, deterring and determining the progress towards distributive justice for the majority of working people who came to be branded and relegated as the backward classes.

### ***Academic readings***

Academic efforts to unravel the socio-legal implications and complications behind these apparently scanty and almost cryptic constitutional provisions, the hesitant and piecemeal executive orders, and the quagmire of judicial interventions and to ferret out their intricate implications for the different segments of the population came mainly in two spurts: 1) around the time when the constitution was adopted when the efforts were to understand the general meaning of the term “backward classes” and their bearing on what was considered as the “equality” obsessions of the constitution-makers; and 2) when the Mandal Commission was implemented, and this time, the focus was acutely on the backward classes in its narrow sense, of “Other Backward Classes.” As on most other themes, the social science output on this issue of backward classes has also been mostly in the nature of firefighting, that is ad hoc reaction, and also to a large extent, to explain and thereby justify, the position of the dominant within society and the state. However, there has been a minuscule number of academicians who have come up with elaborate and difficult-to-come-by documentation on the issue and also unraveled the workings of group power largely hidden behind the legal-judicial-executive fiats and diktats. Some of the more important of such writings, from which this intervention would be drawing upon quite liberally, are noted here.

First of all, we have the classic work of Marc Galanter (1961, 1978 and 1984). Galanter has been engaged with the different aspects of the issue of “backward classes” for a long time and his covering of the vast and scattered areas of legal, judicial and executive activities both at the central and state levels is truly comprehensive and masterly, and is yet to be surpassed. His work is a mine of information, making the work of the others easy. This intervention would be relying heavily on his pioneering research.

Ratna G. Revankar (1971) studied the Indian Constitution from the point of view of the backward classes. Although there is a chapter here dealing specifically with the Other Backward Classes, her major thrust is on the Scheduled Castes, Tribes, etc.; further, her focus is limited to the explanation of the constitutional debates, provisions and practices with reference to the synchronically understood caste society.

Leela Dushkin (1967 and 1979) has studied the issue at two levels: One, at the level of the princely state of Mysore, which made very important and groundbreaking interventions in this matter, and two, at the all-India level. Her works cover both the Scheduled Castes and those who have been termed as the Other Backward Classes.

Andre Beteille (1986, 1990, 1991 and 2002) has been preoccupied for a long time with the interfaces of caste, equality and protective discrimination. His theoretical reflections on equality and inequality in the context of India, of a caste-ridden society in general and the constitution-making in particular, would help one to evaluate the socio-legal scenario from a proper perspective.

P. Radhakrishnan (1990 and 1993) has been studying the evolution and working of the system of protective discrimination in favor of the backward classes in the Madras Presidency, another significant and pioneering state in this matter. His meticulously documented essays reveal in detail, not only the behind-the-scenes administrative workings of the Presidency but also throw light on the larger history of the subcontinent.

Of the more recent writings on the subject, mention must be made of at least two. One is the work of Christophe Jaffrelot (2000, 2003, 2005 and 2009) who records the more recent history of the socio-political movement of the “other backward classes” in North India; while he does not weave his narrative with the ongoing political and judicial hermeneutics of the related concepts, he does provide sufficient background and pointed trajectory of the same.

Rochana Bajpai (2002 and 2011) explores in considerable detail the exact area of our concern. Even if her work is limited to the doings and goings on within the ruling circles, she meticulously lays bare the power-ramification of the latter phase of Indian nationalism, constitutional assembly debates and early state-making in the course of the ruling group’s hegemonic processes. Her work is a valuable supplement to that of Galanter.

Another work, very useful for the purpose at hand, is that of Laura Dudley Jenkins (2003), which is of general nature. She analyses the effect of administrative acts in general and of defining, classifying, etc., in particular on the different deprived sections of society. According to her, administrative categorization, particularly when tagged with some benefits, tends to create and nurture identities and identifications, having the effect of even transforming the subjects collectively. However, such an effect, she warns us, is not total and that the concerned groups also have some space for manipulation and shaping of identities.

More recently, K. C. Yadav (1994) has come up with an interesting text focusing solely on the other backward classes. The text is dense and the approach critical; it is also supplemented with a lot of documents in the appendix. The study could be considered as a rare example of studying the subject from within. We will be drawing upon it not only for the information it provides but also the point of view it suggests on the major administrative events and issues on the matter.

The above mentioned are by no means exhaustive but they are only a few selected items of literature on the theme, and they provide the necessary data and details for our own presentation here. Of these and also similar literature, it needs to be said however, that they all tend to take and treat policy deliberations, judicial pronouncements and executive orders in isolation of the wider, encompassing and long-term socio-political process of the larger society. In the wake of colonialism down to nation state formation, through nationalism of a particular kind, numerous, multi-level and complex changes have been taking place. The study then of

the rise of the so-called backward classes, their clamor for a share of the new dispensation and the ensuing struggles and the state's response to this, all need to be contextualized if only to achieve a proper focus on the theme at hand and interpret meaningfully its implications. Whether not or insufficiently contextualized, even densely documented empirical studies and textual exegesis tend to take several macro and value premises for granted and these premises willy-nilly determine and shape the meaning and import of the research, particularly at the micro level. When, on the other hand, these implicit macro premises are spelt out and the micro empirical studies are contextualized, the research may reveal different realities and alternative perspectives.

### **Implications of non-contextualization**

Non-contextualized studies of “backward classes,” tend to result in three outcomes: First of all, the notions of backwardness and its correlates are non-critically taken for granted and through repeated and isolated usage, they become non-problematically internalized and thus naturalized. Second, the term “backward classes,” being basically a legal-administrative term, studies move mostly around the commissions and omissions of the establishment, vesting it with the sole and effective and, more often than not, unwarranted agency and also legitimacy. The administrative acts tend to be viewed as proactive and even progressive, as we suggested earlier. Third, concentration on the non-contextualized administrative acts would give the impression that the Indian constitutional and administrative regime of protective discrimination for backward classes is unique, comprehensive, far-reaching and a sign of the liberality of the leading class here, and that through the enshrining and implementation of this mechanism, the foundational problems of social democracy here has been well taken care of! Such a positive and often self-congratulatory image of the state gets to be reproduced in academics. Now, all these and such other premises could be called into question if this regime itself is properly contextualized within the history and politics of the subcontinent.

Further, nearly all the studies on the theme, though rightly and legitimately link the issue of backward classes and discuss it in the context of caste, the presentation and premises of caste itself, leave much to be desired. Caste in all these studies, and also generally, is taken and treated monolithically in a singular and uniform dimension without reference to its more recent historical mutations. Caste is conflated with the subcontinental society across time and space uniformly. Such a reading does not leave much space for counter-ideological maneuvers and severely limits the scope of emancipatory politics. Socio-political contextualization should, therefore, also include historicization of caste.

This intervention then, seeks minimally and tentatively, to engage in such contextualization of the theme of backward classes and the related discourses as they were taking shape in the vortex of the complex social-power-reconfiguration through the macro processes of colonialism, nationalism and state-making. In other words, this is an attempt to critically re-interpret and re-evaluate the emergence of modern India from the vantage point of the aspirations, struggles and frustrations of the vast masses of this subcontinent, administratively transformed and reduced to such categories as the Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes/Other Backward Classes/ Minorities and so on. This would certainly require the bringing in of the recent developments in the historiography and sociology of modern India and the drawing upon of general studies on social movements, politics and ideology. Such an attempt, it is hoped, would at least supplement and help to re-project the more systematic and concrete studies referred to earlier, if not correct some of their insights and conclusions.<sup>4</sup>

## **Contextual moments**

### ***Naturalization of caste social order or the birth of the backwards***

The *first* moment of our contextualization is how the trading British in the course of their annexation of territories and collection of land revenue, through numerous acts of commission and omission, and ruling and inscription came to establish, what has subsequently been monolithically projected as “the tradition” here and thus, laid the foundation for a unified, caste-ranked and religion-insulated Indian social polity. What British imperialism did to the subcontinental society in the course of the two centuries of colonialism has been a matter of fierce debate and the answer to this question has a direct bearing on the problem we have at hand, that is the discourse on backward classes. While what has been offered so far as the nationalist historiography has lost most of its credibility, scholarship of all other hues has recently been evolving a broad consensus on the matter. That is, what is today uniformly projected and dominantly reproduced in academics as the Indian tradition—history and culture—is the creation largely of the colonial period, through collaborative, nay, collusive efforts of the ruling British and the socially dominant in the revenue-rich river-valley areas of the subcontinent. The barest outline of this mega and multi-faceted process from the point of view of the problem at hand could be sketched as below.

When the East India Company, a trading organization, initiated the long process of annexing territories here, with the singular motive of profit-making, in the course of the second half of the 18th century, it first did away with the rajas and maharajas, inaugurated the era of bureaucratic administration and then looked around for appropriate partners (collaborators) in their ruling venture, generally but more specifically, agents for the effective collection and delivery of land and agricultural revenue. Their eyes unavoidably fell on the socially dominant in the valleys, where alone revenue could be had in abundance. These socially dominant—recognized as the Brahmin, Brahminical and Brahminized (or in the sociological euphemism, “Sanskritized”)—were the only organized, somewhat pan-Indian and fairly literate communities and had already established their dominance and pre-eminence in hierarchical caste order *à la* their sacred texts in *the river-valley areas of the subcontinent, from the Gangetic in the north to the Kaveri in the south*. The company briskly settled a contract with these, constituting them either as zamindars or ryots, for the uninterrupted delivery of revenue. The other side of the contract was “non-interference in custom and tradition,” and this included respect for and deference to the local social precedence in dealing with the larger public. This contract, particularly the promise of non-interference on the part of the superior trading company virtually turned out to be a blank cheque in favor of the valley-dominant people: For one, the British were duty-bound to assist their junior partners in all possible ways in the newly authorized task of revenue collection on their behalf; and again, the occasional irksome interference from above could always be warded off by these intermediaries in the name of some custom and tradition or the other. Through such mutually beneficial association and arrangement, started the century-long aggrandizing career of the valley-dominant people, slowly transforming—unifying, consolidating and training—itself as the new middle class of the now-politically unified subcontinental state and society. *Parallel to this basic process were the more or less successful efforts to extend to and reproduce the valley model of caste-hierarchical society at the newly unified state level, that is, inscription of a single and monolithic religio-cultural and historical imaginary within state and society and more importantly, the formation of the all-inclusive but Brahmin-text-centered religion called Hinduism.* The Brahminical way of life (caste) and view of life (religion) which were hitherto in precolonial days limited to the few harvest-rich valleys, have now become coextensive with the subconti-

ment itself, through the auspices and patronage of collusive colonialism. The obvious corollaries to these dominant processes were *the unilateral pauperization of the laboring and productive communities everywhere, super-imposition of the dominant Brahminical culture and religion on the diversified and hitherto semi-autonomous, multiple, religio-cultural traditions, thus causing their subordination and degradation, and subsequent marginalization from the newly emerging public spheres.* The mass of small farming and fractious communities, but also many well-to-do communities with ruling traditions everywhere came to be recognized, labeled and integrated within the Brahminical Varna system mostly as the Shudras and Ati-shudras and as part and parcel of the colonially unified new Hindu religion. At the end of the first century of colonialism, India thus emerged as a single and monolithic caste-ordered society with the Brahminical classes, on the one hand, wielding monopoly control *both in the traditional realm of land and agriculture and also in the emerging spheres of education, employment and socio-political representation; and on the other hand, the mass of the historically evolved and culturally differentiated people were deprived, subordinated, degraded and marginalized.* This socio-political polarization everywhere found its popular expressions as the raja/porja, dwija/ekeja, bhadralog/chotelog, dikk/avasi, raniparaj/kaliparaj, brahmana/Shudra, badejat/chotejat, melchadhi/keezhchadhi, and so on.

This homogenized, singular and extremely polarized hierarchical formation of the subcontinental societies is something new in their histories and certainly against their foundational genius of diversity. And the fact that such a formation was abetted by a foreign power in collusion with the local Brahminical elements, in fact, aggravated the situation. From the point of view of the toiling and productive masses, this formation brought about three important oppressive realities: First, through the land settlements, whether zamindari or ryotwari, the traditional and sole realm of the agrarian was taken away from those who worked on land and invested it on the leisurely classes. Second, in culture and religion, the diverse, autonomous and linguistically defined realms were all brought under the sway and subjugation of the singular “Brahminical” in the name of Hinduism, imagined and fabricated in the image of Semitic religions. This double deprivation, that is, in the political economy as well as the cultural autonomy, came to characterize the masses who, now within the Brahminical jargon came to be recognized, manifestly or not, as the Shudras. Third, as virtual or actual Shudras, they were also denied entrance into the collusive new realms of institutional training (education) and institutional power (employment). It was, thus, the colonially and unilaterally empowered “Brahminical” with all its *peculiarities and perversities* that became the *standard* with which the equally unilaterally disempowered “non-Brahminical masses” began to be judged and found wanting. It is these historically reduced “non-Brahminical masses” shorn of their diversity, plurality of skills and dignity which, subsequently and in contestation, came to be branded monolithically as the backward classes and subjected to demeaning and debilitating discourses.

Two points need to be highlighted here: One, is the unilateral empowerment, almost to the point of identification, of the Brahminical segments of the population within the emerging colonial regime and this has been recognized and documented fairly well; two, is the imparting of the Brahminical *peculiarities and perversities* as mentioned above to the self-same emerging regime. While it could be debated whether it was the Brahminical that transformed itself into the colonial or it was the colonial that eventually became Brahminical, the point for our consideration is that it was this fatal fusion that resulted in the unilateral deprivation and degradation of the masses who, for the first time, came to be branded and relegated monolithically as the backward classes, that is, the historically evolved, diverse and autonomous ethnic, linguistic, religious and territorial communities with different self-identifications and trajectories, came to be homogenized, reduced and brought within a single demeaning category at this first phase of collusive colonialism.<sup>5</sup>

## **Up against the collusively brought-about degradation and deprivation**

The *second* moment of contextualization is the people's own efforts to resist and move out of the colonially imposed caste-determination, that is, degradation and deprivation, and adverse inclusion in the collusively-erected new regime, appropriate a share in the emerging power configuration and to create *different* niches of honorable self-identifications for themselves. The complex processes of deprivation, containment and degradation that were triggered by the unilateral support of the trading company to the revenue-delivering Brahminical, could not but kick-start more than equal and multi-level reactions and resistances. The mass of toiling people—subsequently to be lumped together and termed the “lower/backward castes”—everywhere realized the beginning of the end of the old regime and dawn of a new one. They responded to the *regressive and sudden* changes in their life in multitudinous ways: Vagrancy, looting grain, engaging in “criminal” activities, sporadic violent retaliation and even reprisals against the socially dominant, setting up caste associations and claiming of higher status, proliferation of self-help efforts, emergence of revitalization movements, tribal revolts, demand for entry into the new education, share in government employment and political representation, fleeing the stranglehold of Hinduism, construction of alternative sacred canopies, invention of histories, and so on.

Beginning as early as the turn of the 19th century, people started registering their opposition to and clamoring for protection from colonially abetted Brahminical Hinduism which was increasingly becoming predatory in all spheres of collective life. Fragmented and scattered though they all were in terms of caste, religion, region and language, the unification and homogenization of the state administration, to an extent, determined and brought together their aspirational thrusts.

Some common and elementary aspects of these apparently fragmented peoples' counter-moves and movements that are pertinent to the problem on hand need to be noted. *Firstly*, what strikes one is the pervasive nature of these counter-moves. Historiography has not done justice to this, but merely notes the larger anti-Brahmin movements in the south and west. Indeed, there was no single area in the subcontinent where colonialism had set in that was free from such counter-moves of the people. Such pervasiveness does indicate the *structural* as well as *cultural* implications of the peoples' movements.

*Secondly*, they were all directly or indirectly addressing the newly unified colonial but *modern* state. Even where the confrontation was directly between the people and the socially dominant, the former did expect the state as an institution of modernity to intervene on their behalf.

*Thirdly*, despite the vast range of differences in the mobilizational efforts—location, social status, resources, numerical strength, intensity of emotion, occupational uniqueness, language, culture and so on—there was a remarkable unity in the beneath-the-surface-trajectory of these movements, to an extent made possible by the now unifying state. They were all invariably trajectoryed towards *escaping the newly imposed homogenized caste-determination/degradation and achieving equal participation as well as equal honor in the tortuously emerging public-political sphere*.

*Fourthly*, they also realized that the key to the entry to this power- and resource-loaded public-political sphere was *modern education*. They clearly saw that education leads to cash/salaried *employment* and thereon to *socio-political representation*. One could see throughout the period in discussion, multiple and persistent ways of attempts to enter these power-bearing public spheres through education—self-initiated small efforts, selective and critical availing of the missionary educational endeavors and demanding the state for educational inclusion.

*Fifthly*, these peoples' movements everywhere threw up leaders and ideologues who elaborated, interpreted and argued out the meaning, implications and trajectory of the struggles; important

elements of this ideologizing were the *persistent critique* they escalated at the existing situation of caste-degradation and exploitation, *identification of the human agency*, the Brahminical, behind and responsible for all these, and the need for *democratic transformation of the socio-political totality*. From their quasi-theoretical elaborations, it is possible to discern that their take was on two fronts: Structural and positional. *The more well-known ideologs, while pushing forward the cause of the relegated castes and communities, to positional advantages, in other words, empowerment of the different sections, were simultaneously insisting on changing the terms of the discourse and relational power within society, that is structural, namely, the abolition of caste itself; in other words, emancipatory.*

Sixthly, the efforts to move away from the colonially retrieved and reestablished Brahminical principles and practices of power, included seeing, recognizing and projecting themselves as new/different collectivities in the light of their own understandings of the subcontinental history and culture. This was an important and new form of struggle. These self-definitions or self-identifications were necessarily diverse reflecting the *foundational diversity of the subcontinent*: Adi-Hindu, Adi-Andhra, Adi-Karnataka, Adivasi, Mulnivasi, Adi-Dravidar, Maratha, Dravidar, Adi-Tamil, Tamil, Buddhist, Christian, Non-Brahmin, Namashudras, Arundathiyar, Devendra Kula Vellalas, Mahimadharms, Satnamis, Adharmists, etc. There were still others who thought they could achieve status, self-respect and thereby also economic betterment within the Brahminical social order itself by “reforming” themselves. They could not, of course, claim the Brahminical status, because it was projected as unique, above everybody else and almost ineffable, but there were several claimants for the statuses of Kshatriya and Vaisya. Whether within the Brahminical system as a few tried or outside it, as many claimed, their trajectory was clear enough. The idea was to escape the degradation as well as deprivation associated with being the lower/backward castes within the now fast-naturalizing Brahminical social hierarchy and achieve a sense of honor, self-respect, entitlement, all representing different aspects of social citizenship. Defining themselves either as higher up within or something different outside, was certainly seen as part and parcel of their efforts to get rid of caste-determination. It was strategically necessary for them to declare themselves as not part of the degrading caste order as a whole or at least that part that imposed disabilities on them.

Further, depending on their specific social location, that is, relation with the Brahminical and also the prevailing attitude of the state, their strategy of self-projection varied. Their whole range of efforts could be placed between two hermeneutically understood polarities of *difference* and *discrimination*. Their claim for entitlement was based on two axes: One, difference, that they are different, that is outside the constraining cultural configuration that was emerging and appropriating power; and two, discriminated, that though they fall within the emergent cultural configuration, on account of its peculiar nature, they are being discriminated. However, this distinction should not be exaggerated, for both difference and discrimination meant that the claimants fall outside the emerging power circle and thus are excluded; the distinction really points to the strategy of the socially dominant to divide and control: some are culturally excluded and thus deprived, and others are included but discriminated; in other words, adversely included and thus once again deprived. Under the concrete circumstances of the colonial period in the subcontinent, the Muslims came to represent the extreme case of difference and thus, their claim of minority status, while the so-called untouchables represented the most discriminated against. In between, however, the general mass of people belonging to various castes and communities, who saw themselves both as different as well as discriminated against. Whether differentiated or discriminated, the question was the claim for *just inclusion*. However, from the point of view of the claimants as expressed in the course of the struggles, this was an important distinction. While *difference* addressed the question of power-sharing, equitable distribution and democratization of power in a caste-religion ridden society, *discrimination* argued for amelioration, welfare and

even special attention; needless to say that every argument had the elements of both in varying degrees under varying circumstances.

The points to be remembered in this context are that the scattered castes and communities of the subcontinent unambiguously demonstrated their *subjectivity and agency* through ideological and actual resistances everywhere to the new processes of their deprivation and degradation. Their *double trajectory* was the escape of the collusively imposed Shudra/backward status, which involved degradation and deprivation simultaneously and the achievement of “participatory parity” in the new: Education, employment and representation. Their take was thus both structural (emancipation) and positional (empowerment), their target was the human agency behind their deprivation and degradation, that is the Brahminical, and their multiple niches of self-identification were in direct contrast to the externally and somewhat homogenously branded Shudra/Ati-shudra/Backward identification.

The major ideologs of the people in their numerous articulations and the mass of people in the course of their different struggles also demonstrated their awareness that the current lower/backward status was not their natural or “timeless” attribute but collusively, suddenly and against all the historical genius of the land, was brought about in recent times. Rejection and resistance, therefore, were their primary response; however, as it was suggested above, an element of acceptance of backwardness as a strategy for empowerment could also be noted.<sup>6</sup>

### **Caste, society and category-wise rights**

The *third* moment of contextualization delineates the reluctant, partial and uneven response of the colonial state to the pervasive restlessness and persistent clamor by the masses for inclusion in the emergent new. The century-long, more or less exclusive dealings of the rulers with the socially dominant for the purpose of land revenue, on the promise of non-interference, had rendered the trading British virtually its prisoner, incapable of reaching beyond the elite except through its intermediation. Communications of the colonial state with the larger masses for a century or so, had more or less been through the agency and on the terms of the Brahminical revenue collectors, in deference to and thereby reinforcing the existing forms of social precedence. With the Sepoy mutiny and the subsequent parliamentary takeover of the country, however, the British got an opportunity to disentangle themselves from their debilitating Brahminical encirclement. If non-interference was the principle of survival for the trading British, now with the royal proclamation of equal treatment of all, minimum interference, particularly in favor of the hitherto excluded, had become the inevitable strategy on the very same principle of survival. *A series of measures followed, which cumulatively, had the effect at least of token inclusion of the hitherto relegated, namely tenancy laws against eviction, regularization of recruitment, implementation of procedure codes in law courts, admission to schools and public employments for the Muslims and “lower castes” and some sense of participation for the larger public in the administration through nomination, selection or election.* The British had now to give up their century-old policy of merely following the lead of the socially dominant and revenue brokers in all matters pertaining to group relations within society and demonstrate some semblance of governance in the modern sense. The nature, dynamics and limit of what the British would, could or appear to do, was determined by several internal and external factors—their racial, imperial, bureaucratic character, continuing dependence on the socially dominant, resistance/cooperation from without and the historically-evolved regional diversity of the subcontinent, to mention only the more prominent ones. However, working in and through these various objective and structural factors, what seems to be important, if we are to believe the developments in scholarship on the issue, is the British increasing consolidation of self-perception, their perception of the history,

culture and society of the subcontinent and based on these, the idea and strategy of how exactly the people here ought to be governed.

Though, through the discovery of the Aryan in Europe, the rulers could be said to have perceived some similarity and identification with the socially dominant here, when it came to the question of serious ruling, it was basically the difference that seems to have guided and largely determined their policies. More concretely, the British held two contradictory views of India, and these have been described as *affirmative* and *negative Orientalisms*. The affirmative Orientalism is the idea that the subcontinent constitutes one, grand, seamless, *organically evolved* and *spiritual* civilization, from which the world in general and the British in particular, had much to learn. Such a view seems to have predominated in the first century of colonialism, when the rulers had merrily let almost the entire affair be taken care of by the local socially dominant people with whom they had had enduring partnership and from whom they learned the basics of the Indian society. The negative Orientalism was just the opposite, that India was a mere congeries of semi-insulated, distinct and segregated castes, communities, interest groups, cults and sects, all more or less frozen in time; in other words, the country was a basket case, and no one here had the sense of the common, public or universal. This latter view came to dominate the second half of the colonial period when the British had to, for whatever reason, get down to the unwieldy and tricky business of governance in the modern sense. How the British came to acquire both these views, through their century-long association with the Brahminically dominant need not detain us for long except to say that such a dichotomous view of the society only Orientalistically reproduced the established Brahminical notion of *tiered social reality* of *savarna* and *avarna* and even of the philosophical notion of the *superior* and *inferior* truths co-existing in harmony.

As the British were settling down to the business of governance, it was this “lower” and pluralized ground reality they had to grapple with. And they also found this convenient to establish a contrast between themselves as the superior, and the ruled as the inferior. The society in India, they found, unlike that in Britain, is constituted of groups, segments, interests, etc. So, the principles and practices of governance in India could not be the same as in Britain but shaped in accordance with its nature and dynamics. That the society in India was constituted basically of groups of various kinds, but hierarchically unified, the British had discovered thanks to the collaboration of the Brahminical in the course of ethnographic recording and census enumeration and now they sought to transform this insight into the new foundation of the colonial polity. Group-wise induction into the emerging public-political sphere became the general policy of the rulers if only to appease the clamoring groups. The administrative recognition of these already mobilized social-cultural groups transformed them into interest groups of various kinds. While caste and religion were taken as basic, there were also other interest groups such as landlords, native rulers, universities, Europeans, Anglo-Indians, etc.

Induction of these groups into the public-political was neither a singular nor linear process. There were significant variations from region to region and province to province as the colonial polity was, in a serious sense, de-centralized. And again, the pace varied in all the three important areas of integration, that is, education, employment and administrative-political representation, in response to the pressures of the groups. Within the groups themselves, different sections were interested in one or the other aspects of induction. The most important and most demanded was the extension of education to the hitherto relegated groups. The most contested, of course, was the representation in services as the new and heavily power-resource-loaded arena. Political representation was a relative latecomer, a bone of contestation among the political parties and leaders. In general, the southern and western regions were seen to be more aggressive, that is carrying forward what has come to be known as “communal representation.”

And this moved along the axis of caste, that is, groups differentiating and distancing themselves from the Brahmins. In the north and east, it was “religion” (community) that became the pivotal point of mobilization, differentiating from the new arrival “Hinduism;” and here too it was the Muslim community mobilization as “Minority” which dominated, but there also others, the Sikhs, Parsee minority efforts.

The emerging educated “middle classes” were also not left out. They were also considered, but as *one among the several contending groups*. Though these middle classes claimed for themselves universal representation of all classes and communities and in all the three public spheres of education, employment and political representation and hence were opposed to the inclusion of anybody else in any sphere, the British found that they “represented none but themselves.” Thus the colonial state continued to include whatever group came to organize itself, reached up to the public-political surface and demanded recognition and inclusion. While all sorts of groups were included in the beginning, eventually they came to fall on the axis of difference/discrimination, as minorities or depressed/backward classes. *The underlying principle clearly was to defuse the monopoly of the Brahminical in all these three areas of education, employment and political representation and distribute power and resources among many other communities.*

Within the colonial logic, a fragmented and community-based society in which individuation has not taken place, nay, individuation has been ideologically arrested through collusive valorization of caste and religion by the social elite and trading colonialists, representation, political or otherwise could only be based on the self-same *community/category*-basis; It cannot claim *territorial* representation as in liberal democracies, which are basically libertarian in the sense of individual-rights based. Further, the colonizers did not see their role as initiators of societal transformation leading to such a liberal democratic polity. To add to this, as though to confirm the British view, the politically mobilized Brahminical elite, now turning nationalist, was constantly propagating the idea that society and culture in India were not like those in Britain, at least in these crucial social-relational aspects. If political organization, under such circumstances was not to be far removed from its social foundations, then *community/category*-wise representation for India was a better choice than territorial representation. Besides, the mass of people clamoring for a share in the emergent public sphere was consistently accusing the elite mobilization, not without evidence and despite its pretensions and claims to the contrary, as basically community-based; and if caste and religion are to remain public as the local Brahminical elite itself insisted upon, their own challenge was to include them also as castes and communities.

The colonial scheme of community-wise rights, far from being an *exception*, was the *rule*; it was a response both to the elite insistence of India’s (or that of the East) difference from Britain (or that of the West) as well as the clamor of the masses for their own proportionate share in the pie. It was a simple, though crude, method of power-sharing that was only possible under the given circumstances. More than “minority protection” and “amelioration of the deprived,” the colonial scheme was seen as a simple tool of *power distribution* and dilution of the elite monopoly in the emergent public. As the British sought to “pacify” every group that mobilized itself and came up demanding its own proportionate share, their trajectory was to comprehend the entire society. A caste-religion based social organization and socio-political mobilization could but have only a scheme of caste-community based sharing of power and resources.

The colonial scheme of community-wise rights did not come about all of a sudden or all at once. As suggested above, it was an inevitable result, first to the colonially abetted formation of Brahminical (caste) Hinduism (religion) on the one hand, and the persistent clamor both by those who were excluded from it and adversely included in it, on the other. While in the spheres

of education and employment the process had started much earlier and in a diverse manner in different provinces, at the level of representation, it began with the process of nomination to the administrative and later, elective bodies. The Muslims of the north were the first to achieve their share; then the non-Brahmins both of the west and south followed suit; the so-called Depressed Classes everywhere also were being inducted. There were also several other “pacification” projects—exclusions and protections of traditional areas, rights, etc.—implemented for the so-called tribals as they were being brought within the colonial orbit. As suggested above, “interest groups” such as landlords and universities were also given representations. Significant, however, were the legislative acts of the years 1909, 1919 and of course 1935, determining the contour and content of participation by the different groups.

Such a reaching out to the different groups as against the previous practice of limiting colonial patronage to the socially dominant, was consistently resisted everywhere with more or less intensity. *The original revenue-brokers, who through monopolistic colonial patronage got education and training, were fast transforming themselves into the “middle classes,” emerged as anti-colonial nationalists precisely at this instance of extension of colonial patronage to include groups other than themselves.* Claiming at once natural (caste) leadership and monopoly representation of the entire population, having picked up the right jargon and language, and in the name of liberal democracy, resisted the systematic grant of group-wise rights as abetting casteism and communalism.

It must be said, however, that this reaching out to the hitherto relegated castes and communities by the imperialists, initiated as it was by survival instincts, was minimal and marginal and very often only cosmetic. And this step again was a hesitant one, as the rulers were very much in the grip of the dominant Brahminical classes still. Therefore, the process of extending colonial privilege to the subaltern groups was not carried to its logical conclusion, nor did it meet the aspirations of the clamoring groups and communities.

Further, though the idea was that representation was to be in accordance with the population proportion of the self-defined communities, the principle was never followed, particularly when the question of obliging the socially dominant was concerned. That is, everywhere, the socially dominant were represented even within this new scheme of power-sharing, in far excess of their population proportion. Finally, the self-definition of the groups themselves was a fluid and often contested process, the tendency of the groups being to proliferate with the promise of recognition and inclusion. With all these shortcomings, distortions, unevenness and incompleteness in its conception as well as implementation and even when the benefits accrued was mostly symbolic, this colonial scheme of community-wise rights was indeed perceived as a positive response of the British to the struggles of the relegated groups.

The points to be remembered in this context are, first, the state recognition that political organization should correspond to the social organization and hence, in a caste-religion divided society, category-wise rights are to be the rule; second, from the point of view of the ruling British, this scheme was not only the democracy appropriate for the situation but also a great liquidator of the monopoly of the increasingly antagonistic middle classes; third, for the nationalists, this scheme was against the genius of the land and it was *resistance to this scheme which provided the substance to what was being projected as the anti-colonial nationalism*; fourth, for the newly-induced groups of people, though this scheme was but a symbolic beginning, it was a significant gain and a move in the right direction given the fact that the dominant Brahminical classes were not willing to give up their privileges even in modernity but insisted anachronistically the continuance of caste ideology and organization. Thus, for the caste-subalternized groups and externalized minorities, this rule of category-wise rights was a way out, not of their own choice, but an option born of their constraining circumstances.<sup>7</sup>

### **Rolling back the historically achieved rights**

The *fourth* moment of contextualization explains how the rise and consolidation of the colonially-valorized Brahminical, transforming itself into the so-called “middle classes,” and subsequently as “nationalists” reacted negatively to this partial and uneven achievement of category-wise rights by the fragmented masses everywhere, in its three phases: birth, growth and transformation into the new independent state. In the *first* phase, the single most significant point is the precise juncture in which the partnership of the Brahminical elite with the imperialists turned sour and anti-colonial nationalism emerged. How and why the hitherto considered “providential” government, suddenly became “satanic,” in the view of the socially dominant sometime during the third quarter of the 19th century, has hardly been contextually or critically explored in the established historiographies, old or new. However, reading together the recent developments in scholarship, but more so, reading the vernacular-subaltern literatures of the contemporary times, it is increasingly becoming clear that *it was this switch-over in the British policy, from “non-interference,” to “minimal interference” in favor of the relegated groups which triggered off this change of attitude on the part of the socially dominant.* For our purpose and within our narrative, it was this belated, hesitant and almost cosmetic introduction of this scheme of category-wise rights, which set off the shrill alarms of “culture is threatened,” “tradition is broken” and “religion is in danger.” Thus, the introduction of this scheme of category-wise rights in the crucial and contested spheres of education, employment and representation, with the consequent minimal inclusion of the relegated groups within the emergent public-political sphere, is the context as well as the cause of the beginnings of the anti-colonial nationalism in the subcontinent. This means that *if the emergent Brahminical middle classes came to poise themselves against the colonizers, by that very same motion, they also became antagonistic to the socio-political arrival of the diversified and now subalternized masses.* This dual and ambivalent positioning of the socially dominant, at the very juncture of their *birth* as the nationalist class, was to remain its hallmark all through and remains so to this day.

In the *second* phase, taking off from their own “ideologically re-traditionalized” social pre-eminence and the fact that it was mostly they who were the “educated,” the now-politically organized middle class claimed that it was they and only they who had the monopoly right of filling out all the three emergent and inter-related dimensions of the public sphere. Their claim for leadership, as suggested, was based on two counts: One, they were the natural leaders as “caste Hindus,” following the ideology of differential dharma for people born with different tendencies, which meant that the others should follow their own dharma of menial service; two, they are the “English-educated and English trained,” for, the definition and determination of the new public is to be in terms of the *English understood socially and culturally.* While its extreme and unambiguous statement was to come from Mr Gandhi who claimed that he and he alone in his own physical body represented the entire nation including the untouchables, the same was consistently being peddled out in various ways and varying contexts, by most of the prominent leaders of the nationalist movement. It was during this phase that the sectarian way and view of life of the Brahminically dominant were transforming themselves through praxis, into the modern ideology of the nation-to-come. Clearly, the axis of their mobilization was caste-religion based, supposedly the unique and ancient social synthesis. A new-found monolithic varna order and still newer-found religion with appropriate and, of course, in hierarchically structured form, fixing all castes and communities, was being formed discursively.

However, the “nationalist” class had to confront two challenges, one from the clamoring masses within the new dispensation and two, the colonial state, willing for whatever reason to toy with the idea of obliging the masses at least minimally. The British, far from deciding to cut

off their partnership with the Brahminical (read the Congress), was certainly for cutting it to size. Within such a scenario, the Congress in the north had to capitulate with the Muslim League through the Lucknow Pact of 1921. Once again, it was compelled to share power, resources and representation with those who subsequently have come to be known as the Scheduled Castes, through the Poona Pact of 1931. In the south, however, the circumstances were slightly different. With much less state-support, the non-Brahmins, early on, had challenged the monopoly of the Congress through the South Indian Liberal Federation or Justice Party. The Congress, which agreed to compromise with the Muslims, as they could not be brought within the Hindu fold and agreed to include the untouchables on certain conditions, as the problem was relatively minor and the state-support for them was strong, could not bring itself to compromise with the non-Brahmins, who formed the bulk of the population. The non-Brahmins, who predominantly included those who were later labeled as the backward classes, for historical reasons, had effectively countered the monopoly claims of the Congress everywhere but more prominently in the west and south. And it had to concede power, and this concession came to be inscribed as the political practice there in the Madras Presidency and some of the other states of the south and also to a lesser extent, in the Bombay Presidency. Despite all these actual concessions, which were mostly forced on it, the Congress as the representative of the colonially valorized Brahminical, stood firm in its claim for monopoly occupation of the public and political spheres and was perennially on the lookout for removing or scuttling the “privileges” that the others had come to enjoy under colonialism. For, within its own ideology, the other groups were interlopers, being unwarrantedly abetted and propped up by the colonial state. The political rhetoric of the day went like this: The state was following the policy of “divide and rule;” this policy was trajectory against the rising anti-colonial (therefore, progressive and legitimate!) nationalist aspirations; the clamoring mass of people fragmented in terms of caste and religion were all parochial, communal as against national and were indeed only set up by the British; and they themselves were the universal and stood for the unity of the country and homogeneity of the nation-to-be.

In point of fact, during the entire nationalist phase, the contestation between the dominant middle class and the caste-religion fragmented masses, subsequently to be categorized as the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes and also the Minorities, was more pervasive, complex, intractable and acrimonious than the much-vaunted political antagonism between the middle classes and the colonial state. More happenings on the ground could be explained through this former rather than the latter antagonism. While the Congress in practice acquiesced to the category-wise scheme of 1935, *it had by no means reconciled to it* as it became clear in the following state-constituting phase.

The next, *third* phase of state-building, which could also be called the Nehruvian, if the earlier one could be termed as the Gandhian, is characterized by the near-monopoly control of the socially dominant. Within a broad enough framework, the Constitutional Assembly, the crucial site, the nationalist forces and its leaders were relatively left alone to devise the kind of society they wanted to envisage for the future of India. The debilitating colonial patronage and the non-representative nature of this assembly on several counts have been pointed out by many a scholar. Crucial to our point of view, however, is the complete dominance over the assembly by the Indian National Congress. Even the non-Congress members were brought in at the insistence of the Congress in order to present a façade of representativeness. We are also told by reliable authorities that every provision of the proposed constitution was thoroughly discussed within the Congress Assembly Party first and decided prior to the discussion on the floor of the Constitutional Assembly. Further, it also has been shown that the clique—Nehru, Patel, Prasad and Azad—operating as an “oligarchy” was in total control, guiding every step of the discussion

and thus, determining the fate of the issues. What is of interest to us is the fate of group-rights at the hands of these nationalist state-makers—what happened to the principle behind it, the transformations it underwent at different stages and the consequences for the different groups hitherto enjoying those rights. While critical insights on this issue are scattered across the prolific literature, it is remarkable that no systematic study has been undertaken from the point of view of the different excluded groups themselves. What could be offered here is the barest outline indicating several far-reaching implications.

First of all, the category-wise rights—proportional representation, separate electorates, weightages, special protections, exclusions, etc.—that is, a proportionate share in the valued goods of education, employment and representation as a principle of distribution were devised by the British as suited to a society in which in addition to the prevalence of traditional caste-religion based divisions. Such divisions were also brought back ideologically in modernity, and were *promptly and unceremoniously dismantled in the name of establishing formal equality and liberal democracy*. The nationalist forces were always insisting that the scheme was part of the larger imperialist strategy of a divide-and-rule policy, preventing the emergence of a united and strong India. More concretely, it was seen as a ploy to thwart the aims of the anti-colonial nationalists. Therefore, the argument was that in the interests of freedom and unity of the nation, such a divisive policy needed to be done away with once for all.

If, from the point of view of the now receding British, the scheme was aimed at defusing the monopoly of the Brahminical few in education, employment and representation, for the struggling groups, on the other hand, the scheme was a fair, even though crude and very insufficient, distribution of power, possible under the present circumstances. It was a scheme which was forced upon the British through their persistent and pervasive struggles everywhere. *And now with the dawn of “freedom,” they simply lost it.* What came in its wake was an ideologically as well as actually emaciated, much reduced and domesticated version tagged with several demeaning conditionalities.

The worst affected, of course, were the Muslims. They lost the British-granted scheme of separate and proportionate representation, a share in real power. Though the partition was said to have nailed the issue, it was not the whole truth. For, as explained above, the Brahminical nationalists were always averse to the grant of group rights to any except to their own groups, effectively camouflaged into “grouplessness.” The Muslims were termed a religious minority and given some concessions for running their own institutions, that is, “cultural rights.” Similarly, the other religious minorities were also disposed of. Though they could not touch the so-called Scheduled Castes as most of their issues had been resolved earlier at the national level, their number came to be reduced severely, and the “privilege” was extended to them on condition that they declare their allegiance to Hinduism, thanks to the idea that Hinduism was the most tolerant, naturalized and unique form of Indian secularism! Though untouchability was abolished they had to accept and abide by the diktat that they were indeed untouchables! Of course, the radical form of power-sharing that had come into existence in the south and west even among the so-called Hindus—the non-Brahmins, backward classes, etc.—was summarily rejected and relegated to an indefinite future, presumably with the hope that the problem would somehow disappear.

If some vestiges of the earlier scheme were retained, their nature was transformed beyond all recognition. *What was the rule under the colonial regime became the exception in independent India.* It is said that nationalism in India is a derivative discourse, but at least in the aspect of the colonial scheme of power-sharing among the different groups, it certainly is not.

As it has been pointed out that the category-wise scheme was done away with as, it was claimed, it hindered the nation from becoming united. Unity within this nationalist paradigm

was a matter of culture and one which carefully precluded any kind of democratization, sharing of power among the contesting groups. *Within the colonial scheme at least there was some effort to see that unity was programmatic, political and modern so that some form of power-sharing constituted the basis.* Abolition of this category-wise scheme by the state-building nationalists had the unfortunate consequence of depriving the hard-won rights of the mass of fragmented groups and arrest, reduce and transform those rights within the tradition of caste-religion framework, which has been ideologically re-valorized in modernity.

For, in point of fact, the nationalists could not obliterate the category-wise scheme altogether or establish a unified nation. They did something far worse. They drastically reduced and transformed the colonially established scheme of power-sharing into a juridico-administrative scheme as a backward classes discourse, running parallel to the very caste-hierarchical ordering itself. Having shorn off the power-sharing aspect of the scheme, the state-builders changed it into a *concession for backwardness on their own conditions and terms and within their own ideology of the colonially homogenized and collusively valorized caste-order.* They seem to have retained some form of *noblesse oblige* and yet consolidated their own position several times over. The jargon of backwardness has taken over from the discourse of power-distribution, de-monopolization and democratization. *Within the new discursive regime, acceptance of caste-inferiority and thus internalization of backwardness is the condition sine qua non for receiving the crumbs which the new and free state may, at its discretion, throw.* Gone were the days when the fragmented castes claimed higher status within or different status without Hinduism. Now, the new constitutional diktat has set off the clamor of backwardness amongst all of them, thereby accepting and affirming their own lowly position within the caste order, lack of merit and also claiming backwardness as their very essence. The tumultuous mass of people, basically non-Brahminical, has effectively been contained: The untouchables were told to stay within and work for Hinduism if they are to receive some token privileges; those who were called the tribes were summarily tagged on along with the scheduled, for they too were equally or more backward; the Muslims were taught, in a new twist, that religion cannot be the basis for position, power or privilege, but as minorities they could run their own institutions provided they do not interfere in the wholesale and pernicious transformation of the public institutions into the majority, that is Brahminical Hindu, institutions; and the non-Brahmins of various kinds were challenged to accept, abide by and also demonstrate, their own backwardness and Shudra nature.

The state-makers certainly did not succeed in their declared objective of producing a unified nation. Or it could be also said that they succeeded in their undeclared objective of transforming the nature of divisiveness among the people, into one of *subservience.* The colonial form of divisiveness, seen merely as constituting different interests had this inkling of going beyond the caste-ideological order. But its reversal at the hands of the state-makers of independent India brought this refractory of divisiveness effectively within the caste-ideological discipline. Thus, went the process of containment of the masses and consolidation of classes in the course of the nationalist adventure of state-building. There was not thus, at the dawn of freedom, much cause for euphoria from the point of view of the fragmented castes and communities who constituted the bulk of the population of this country.<sup>8</sup>

### **Liberal façade on illiberal foundations**

The *fifth* moment of contextualization is the actual inscription of “liberal democracy” in and through the debates in the Constitutional Assembly and the subsequent era of the constitution itself and its socio-political implications. Social scientists in general, and political scientists in particular, speak and write non-problematically of the contemporary Indian nation state as

an instance, though a bit peculiar, of liberal democracy. This notion has been so much naturalized in academic as well as popular thinking on India that it has almost become one of the unconsciously given and, thereby, taken-for-granted premises in scholarly writings. Discussions on concrete issues such as the state, democracy, secularism, development, etc. take place on this premise and against the background of this taken-for-granted liberal democracy. And the context is also presumed to be the same for the question on hand, what has been variously called, protective discrimination, reservations, reverse discrimination, special treatment and affirmative action. It is, therefore, necessary to ferret out at least some of the more important ideological underpinnings of this all-important presumption of liberal democracy in India.

The term liberal democracy is a contested concept on the one hand, but it has also become a near-casual descriptive phrase applied to all the non-communist existent state-societies, on the other. For our purpose, however, two aspects of the notion of liberal democracy are important: *one* is, the inter-related ideas of the individual and his/her entitlement; *two*, is the obligation of the state to ignore or do away with ascriptive differentiations and recognize and relate only to achievement (efficiency, merit, etc.) among individuals. One should not forget the fact, however, that in the place of their origin, these liberal principles emerged as concomitant to or even a consequence of massive and multifaceted change and transition to modernity, described variously as from mechanical solidarity to organic solidarity, *gemeinschaft* to *gesellschaft*, feudal to capitalist, agraria to industria, ascription to achievement, etc. Whatever the description, the constant within all these is the emergence of the significance of the individual and his/her entitlements—freedom and equality—as the supreme within the concerned *society first* and then inscription of the same in the *statute and the state*.

Early on, even before the work of the Constitutional Assembly was formally launched, Mr Nehru was insistent that what he and his colleagues had prepared as the “Objectives Resolution,” be passed by the Assembly *in toto* and without any amendment. What is of relevance to our purpose in this “Objectives Resolution” runs like this:

(5) WHEREIN shall be guaranteed and secured to all the people of India justice, social, economic and political; equality of status, of opportunity, and before the law; freedom of thought, expression, belief, faith worship, vocation, association and action, subject to law and public morality; and (6) WHEREIN adequate safeguards shall be provided for minorities, backward and tribal areas, and depressed and other backward classes.

It was these two clauses of the “Objectives Resolution” that was eventually transformed, with modifications and elaborations, into the chapters on Fundamental *Rights* and Directive *Principles* in the constitution. Already in this Resolution, but much more in its later elaborated forms, the contrast between the two provisions could not but be noticed: The subject of the one is the *individual* and that of the other is *collectivities/groups/categories*; the first one is *justiciable* and the second is *non-justiciable*; the first is clearly the *rule* and the second is the *exception*; the first appears to be envisaged as a *permanent* provision and the second only a *temporary* and passing measure; and again, in the concrete context of the caste-valorized society, the first seems to refer to the interests/ideal of a *minuscule* population and the second to those of the *majority* population. Further, from the context, it is also clear that the “adequate safeguards” which Clause (6) speaks of, is to be understood and interpreted with reference to Clause (5) which prescribes equality for all taken in their non-differentiated and individuated capacity. That is, the presumption clearly is that the various kinds of groups mentioned in the latter clause—depressed classes, other backward classes, tribals and minorities etc.—within the new scheme, are likely to face problems from the functioning of the formal equality for all as laid down in Clause (5); they, obviously

the *majority of the population of the nation*, therefore require protection from the “general” rule/ideal of the nation, that is the interest and aspiration of a minuscule minority. This, in a nutshell, is the liberal democratic vision inscribed within the foundational document of the nation state: the forward march of the few individuated citizens (obviously of the so-called middle classes) with their entitlements—liberty, equality, justice and non-discrimination by the state on the one hand, and adequate protection from this, for the majority of relegated groups, on the other. Mark, indeed, the wording. It is the *safeguards* that are sought to be inscribed! Does this mean that the present dichotomy of the minuscule and majority is sought to be naturalized? Or is it to be eventually done away with? If it is the latter, have adequate policy measures been mandated? Could the non-justiciable and guideline “Principles” fulfil this job?

This inscription of the idealized individual and his entitlements, shorn of all his ascriptive affiliations as the primary goal/aspiration *par excellence* to which all other considerations, particularly those of group welfare and cultural diversities are to be subjected, as the conscious political choice of the makers of the Indian constitution, however, needs to be historically contextualized. It must be remembered that it was this very same human agency—the nationalists—that swore by the principle of caste and community being the very foundation of social life here. The Nehruvian state-making was thus preceded by the high-profile and aggressively prescriptive Gandhian nation-making. And the two apparently are trajected in two opposite directions and now are being harmonized in a typical “Indian way.”

Gandhi glorified *Varnavyavastha*, insisted on non-competitive life, contrasted the goodness of the traditional caste-based Indian life to that of the evil of individualist, competitive and conflictive life of the West. He also insisted that polity be based on the ascriptive characteristics of groups and not on the achievement of individuals. He incessantly sang the praises of harmonious village republics as the constitutive units of this great civilization. He asserted that men are born differently by birth, they ought to recognize this difference and abide by it and not engage in reckless competition with one another, particularly with those of the other (superior?) varnas. If Gandhi was the most unambiguous prescriber of this non- or pre-liberal way of life for the future of India (which is why he is hailed as the father of the nation), all other dignitaries of the nationalist movement also actively upheld these tenets. In this aspect, our own liberal statesman, Mr Nehru, was also no less behind. His reading of Indian history, which was indeed an invention of tradition, therefore prescriptive for the future, was that the three pillars of the society here have been, family life, caste and village organization. The normative foundation thus of the society-to-be, according to the nationalist elite was clearly “ideological re-traditionalization,” in direct contrast to the Western type of individual-based liberal democracy.

There was then a collective and near-consensual ideological somersault in the course of state-making by the nationalist elite as could be read in the discussions of the Constitutional Assembly. They became an aggressive advocate of the abstracted individual, his liberty, freedom and entitlement. It could, of course, be said that “tradition” was but a ploy, plank of anti-colonialism, and that state-making is an entirely different affair, and hence, legitimately, liberal democracy was projected as the ideal. Fair enough; there have been also cases like this in history. But then, liberal democracy is not actualized in re-traditionalized societies such as India, merely by projecting it as an ideal. There have been to date, *no commensurate policies initiated in order to actually transform the group-based society into an individual-based one*. If the unwillingly and with all demeaning conditionalities granted, never consensually implemented, or implemented even partially only at the instance of mass struggle, reservation policies for the “backwards” and the high profile but non-justiciable rhetoric of the Principles are projected as the sole means for such a societal transformation, it is difficult to accept the *bona fides* of the state-making elite. First of all, we have a clear history of the nationalist resistance to all forms of enablement of

the relegated masses; *second*, the very forms chosen as token enablement tend to reinforce the self-same traditional structures; and *third*, such measures as universal, uniform, modern literacy and education, the indispensable template for homogenously enabling all citizens to access and approximate the proposed liberal principles have never been there in the picture. Under such circumstances, the inscription of the liberal ideal of the individual—his freedom and liberty—cannot be read except as the interests (vested) of the minuscule of the society.

What was argued through historical development in the above sections could be stated in terms of a hermeneutic negotiation between formal and substantial equality. The former requires blindness to the differentiations among men born of circumstances beyond their control; the latter is sensitive to such differentiation as operative under concrete circumstances. Now the social context is that of a society which, in the course of history, has been fragmented in terms of caste, religion, region, language, occupation, laboring under the Brahminical ideology of hierarchy, but also “ideologically re-traditionalized” in terms of varna through modern nationalist-political mobilization. That simply means that the different segments and individuals constituting them are not similar/equal to one another so that polity could blindly treat them as equals—the meaning of formal equality. In which case, sensitivity to differences, namely substantial equality should have been the rule and formal equality, if at all necessary, an exception. This was the case, with of course many deficiencies, biases and distortions under the colonial regime. If in the alternative, formal equality that is, insensitivity to differences is considered as a superior principle, a foundational principle of liberal democracy, then *policy measures necessary for the creation of such a homogenized society in which ascriptive differences are reduced to the minimum and rendered inoperative in public-political life, should have been initiated, so that a level playing field is laid out for uniform access and approximation to formal equality for all.* But here is a scenario, in which neither option is envisaged. On the other hand, the social differences between the groups are sought to be discursively entrenched and perpetuated in public-political life, both through ideology and policy, and at the same time, blindness or insensitivity to such differences has been mandated by the inscription of formal equality as the non-negotiable. The social-polity envisaged for the future of India in the context—through all these half-hearted and ill-conceived measures—has not been the creation of a power-homogenized society as it was declared time and again, but a *tiered society* in consonance with the ideologically retrieved tradition under colonialism, consolidated through the so-called anti-colonial nationalism and now sought to be installed within the institutions and instruments of the independent state.

Advocacy of formal equality, that is, insensitivity to ascriptive/historically evolved differences and substantial equality, that is, sensitivity to such difference in the form of group rights are not free-floating and neutral ideas but well embedded within the vortex of contested social power in concrete contexts. They reflect the interest (vested) position of groups within society. In the middle of the 20th century in India, it was a small minority which had a stake in installing this insensitivity to group differences. It was the self-same minority that resolutely fought to retain monopoly power, resources and privileges in its own hand; it was the same minority once again that obdurately stood always against sharing power in the name of India being one that is non-differentiated. Now, it is the same minority, which swore by the exalted name of liberal democracy for the installation of formal equality. The majority as acknowledged and enumerated by Nehru himself—the depressed classes, backward tribes, religious and linguistic minorities, backward classes—however, faced with the stark and debilitating absence of any possible societal transformation and the camouflaged valorization of the group interests and rights of the Brahminically dominant as the universal, had no option other than to demand sensitivity to differences through the installation of substantial equality as the rule. In the event, that the minority interests as formal equality were installed as the rule, and the majority interests as substantial

equality were installed only reluctantly, under pressure as a temporary, delegitimized exception and as non-justiciable rights; and this speaks volumes for the illiberal nature and dynamics of our contemporary social politics.

Formal equality does not constitute or operate as the non-negotiable principle of liberal democracy irrespective of circumstances; it *becomes* so only when applied to similar and similarly placed, that is equalized, individuals. On the other hand, when formal equality, constitutionally and juridically would, when pasted on to a deeply divided and hierarchically structured society without the commensurate measures for transformation towards a level-playing field through the obliteration of all ascriptive differences in public-political life, but merely supplemented with tokenisms like the reservations as in India, reproduce, and indeed it has been not only reproducing the already existing deep divisions within society but tends to aggravate them. This, by no stretch of imagination, could be termed as a liberal democracy. There were, indeed, voices which pointed to this even at those crucial movements of state-making; however, many of the actors imagined that somehow an equalized or politically homogenized society could be *projected* or would soon *emerge automatically* through the functioning of the modern institutions. That this was not to be, has been the lesson of recent history.

Further, the fact that even these reluctantly and meagerly inscribed provisions have only been implemented in fits and starts and never fully, contingent mostly upon people's struggles, but been contested almost at every stage and continuously scuttled through interventions from the judiciary, shows that it has only been the revalorized tradition and not the logic of modernity that is guiding the dynamics of the modern institutions here. What is more significant under such circumstances, however, is that the peoples' life-orientation itself has been reduced and distorted. Their struggles have been diverted to degrading directions. Competition among the fragmented segments has been set off to prove themselves "backward," that is, they are indeed lowly, without any skill or merit and yet they ought to be included for this very reason. This attitude, aspiration and articulation indeed, operate as "self-fulfilling prophecy" turning the majority population of this country as backwards in a real sense! The net result of this is to destabilize the mass of people, push them to defensiveness and contain them. More than this, the foundational genius of this subcontinent—diversity—is through this legal-administrative and homogenized backward classes identification—sought to be scuttled and brought under the sway of colonially-vivorized and nationalistically-entrenched Brahminical Casteism.<sup>9</sup>

### Implications of contextualization

This intervention is about contextualizing the current discourses on the "backward classes" within the larger and long-term socio-political processes of modern India, namely colonialism, nationalism and state-making. Such contextualization has been found necessary because most studies on the subject are limited to either the unravelling of the legal-administrative complexities and implications of the issue, empirically documenting the different movements of the so-called backward classes or sociologically discussing the related concepts and categories. The contention here, is that if the current discourses on the backward classes are critically contextualized within the modern, macro-historical processes, the conclusions we derive from the micro-level, empirical and other studies could be different and enlightening.

Accordingly, we delineated five historic moments or macro-historical contexts for locating the current discourses on the backward classes: The colonially-abetted formation and consolidation of the Brahminical (caste) Hinduism (religion) as the foundation-tradition of modern India;

the rise, resistance and contestation of the masses all over the subcontinent against this structural-cultural subordination and degradation; the partial and uneven pacification/empowerment of the masses by the colonial regime through the scheme of category-wise rights; the nationalist opposition to and dismantling of this scheme of power-sharing and subsequent “backwardization” of the masses; and finally, the deployment of liberal jargon to seal the fate of the masses branded as backward classes.

It does not require much intellectual acumen to see that within the above delineation of five successive moments of India’s entry into modernity, there had been a consistent contestation between two unequally-positioned, but contradictory social trajectories: *one*, the colonially valorized, dominant and organized, pushing for overweening and comprehensive power within the definite ideological scheme of establishing an *ascriptive-tiered* social order along its presumed traditional genius and also in continuity with its premodern history; *two*, the colonially deprived, diversified and hence, much less organized segment, rising against this historic subordination and degradation, critiquing and exposing the former’s hegemonic pretensions, contesting its monopolistic power, and proposing alternative social visions of modernity. The contemporary socio-political conditions of the masses in general, and the discourses of the so-called backward classes in particular, are best read as the net result of this nearly two-century-long contentious history of the subcontinent.

The story of the backwardization, that is deprivation and degradation, of the vast masses of this country either as the Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes/Other Backward Classes/Minorities, as we suggested, began during the first century of collusive colonialism. With the colonially abetted formation of Brahminical (caste) Hinduism (religion), the scattered peoples of this country were more or less forcibly brought within the monolithic, tiered and rigid social imaginary. They came to be known as the Shudras or Ati-Shudras. This first wave of backwardization had two aspects to it: First, the masses were degraded on account of their alleged birth-circumstances as within the traditional Brahminical Varna system; second, they became backward also on account of their exclusion from the parameters of the newly emergent Anglicized as well as Brahminized public-political spheres. Therefore, it is in relation to or comparison with the Anglicized Brahminism or Brahminized Anglicism that the mass of people of this country has been rendered backward!

The rise of critical consciousness amongst the colonially relegated masses as an expression of the emergence of their subjectivity was again double-edged: *Emancipatory* as well as *empowering*. The *emancipatory* dimension consisted of their critique of the Brahminical pretensions to universality, identification of the human agency behind the exploitative situation, the insistence that their condition was a result of a certain form of social relations and the proposal for alternative casteless visions of society and self-identifications. The *empowerment* aspect was their achievement of minimal participation in the newly emergent public-political spheres of education, employment and representation under the colonial regime. The colonial recognition of the mass aspiration, for whatever reason, not only enabled them to participate but also to an extent mitigated their caste degradation as backwardization. With the ascendancy of nationalism and the initiation of the state-making process, much of the critical consciousness in both dimensions was unceremoniously dismantled. The new processes completely did away with the emancipatory, that is, the multiple searches for casteless visions and identifications; and the empowerment was transformed, reduced to the minimum and brought within the ambit of the colonially retrieved and valorized Brahminical casteism. The process of backwardization was put on the rails, now within modernity. And this process was successfully insured for the future, through the pasting of the liberal jargon onto the scenario.

The current backward classes discourse smoothly falls a piece with the overall nationalist imaginary of the subcontinental society. Within this imaginary, the mass of people—Scheduled

Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes, Minorities—have been forever, almost naturally, backward! They are caste-religion bound and not individuated. Their condition is not the result of colonially valorized exploitative social relations, but naturally evolved. Therefore, there is no question of any external human agency behind their condition. The systemic and ideological nature of the retrieved caste does not figure here. Their lack of modern education, non-participation in the services and need for representation are all the *consequence* of their backwardness and not their *cause*. With the collusively and, therefore, ideologically laid out parameters of eligibility, merit and qualifications, all very much along the traditional skills of the Brahminical, they, indeed, require concessions, privileges, exemptions and other forms of condescension. The terms of the discourse as well as the standard for the new public-political life have been set by the colonially valorized Brahminical. Naturally then, the mass of people has been found wanting, legitimately labeled as backward and eligible for concessions at the discretion of the dominant. All that is available to these backward classes today within the dominantly given paradigm is to wear their backwardness on their sleeve, clamor for crumbs and remain grateful and loyal to the establishment for the crumbs thrown their way.

The constitution, despite its rhetoric of “liberty, equality and fraternity,” in effect has only reproduced in modernity a *tiered social polity* of (i) *those who move in the realm of Rights, and (ii) below them those who look for amelioration through Principles*. More concretely, it has divided the entire population of the nation into three modern *varnas*: 1) The general (forward) castes, 2) backward castes (classes) and 3) Scheduled Castes and Tribes. Those who had been set up earlier as minorities, within this new scheme, are welcome now to take the route of backwardness if they want to come in; all forms of diversities have been discounted and cultural/linguistic trajectories have been suppressed, all for the purpose of turning the diversely evolved masses into a single identification of backward classes within a monolithic and pan-Indianized caste system. In this way, the “nation,” has been brought forth through unification and discipline! Such a degrading and deprived categorization of the majority citizenry is continuously and hegemonically reproduced and thereby reinforced not only through legal, juridical and administrative discourses, but more significantly academic discourses as well. For, these categories are also being discussed as immutable identities! The people are encouraged to actualize these identities by limiting their struggles within their parameters and thereby join the process of reproducing their own degradation! Through all these and much more, we are supposed to be retrieving the uniqueness of our civilization, history, culture, etc. from the predatory Western interventions and imposition. Aren’t we told time and again that though we are a nation state like any other, our social polity is our own, nationalism is our own, secularism is our own, nay modernity itself is our very own!

Contextualized this way, in history and theory, the scheme of protective discrimination for the backward classes offered by independent India and the discourses surrounding it may appear neither proactive, generous, extensive nor emancipatory, as claimed either implicitly or explicitly by many of the mainstream writers. It is not proactive for, as it has been pointed out above, the leading class was not in favor of it at any time, and it was only at the struggle of the people concerned or rivalries among the ruling elite that even the scanty, perfunctory and ad hoc inscription of the scheme and its subsequent shoddy implementation came about. It is neither generous nor extensive; at the maximum, it is based on an arbitrarily fixed percentage as a temporary exception and hemmed in all sides by several qualifications; and there are several ways available to the dominant to scuttle it. Its token empowerment value itself is mostly negated through co-option and domestication. Of emancipation, one could hardly think of, for no societal transformation or liberation from caste-bondage is envisaged or is on the agenda. On the other hand, this perfunctory measure has been effectively deployed to contain the critical consciousness of the people concerned by diverting the trajectory of their struggles. More importantly, however,

by projecting this as the substitute of “substantial equality” the dominant sections have wriggled out of their obligation to initiate transformative policy measures for bringing about a genuine liberal democracy.<sup>10</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Extracts from the Constitution of India are taken from the internet version available at <http://www.lawmin.nic.in/coi/coiason29july2008>
- 2 Confirmation of the ideas expressed in these comments could be had in the sections relating to the discussions concerning the issue in the Constitutional Assembly Debates, available at [www.lssNew/constituent/debates/html](http://www.lssNew/constituent/debates/html)
- 3 Details of the incidents and their circumstances mentioned above could be had from the works of Galanter (1961, 1978, 1984) and Yadav (1994).
- 4 Non-contextualized studies of the problem at hand generally lead even sensitive researches into somewhat abstracted, apolitical and thereby non-critically valorized and congratulatory accounts of Indian provisions of “protective discrimination.” See for example, De Swart (2000) and Dharma Kumar (1992). Even such an extremely painstaking researcher as Galanter (1984) begins his celebrated book thus: “India’s system of preferential treatment for historically disadvantaged sections of the population is unprecedented in scope and extent. India embraced equality as a cardinal value against a background of elaborate, valued, and clearly perceived inequalities. Her constitutional policies to offset these proceeded from an awareness of the entrenched and cumulative nature of group inequalities. The result has been an array of programs that I call, collectively, a policy of compensatory discrimination. If one reflects on the propensity of nations to neglect the claims of those at the bottom, I think it is fair to say that this policy of compensatory discrimination has been pursued with remarkable persistence and generosity (if not always with vigour and effectiveness) for the past thirty years.”
- 5 The above paragraphs are an extremely condensed statement and interpretation of inter-related themes that have been elaborated elsewhere, by this author and also several others; see Aloysius (1997, 1998, 2010), King (2008), Frykenberg (1965, 2009) and the references found in them. The peculiarities and perversities of the Brahminical refer to the anti-labor ethic, the singular skill of memorizing and reproducing, heavy literary as against technical bias, etc.
- 6 These paragraphs also are a condensed statement and re-interpretation of Chapter III of Aloysius (1997). For the difference between empowerment and emancipation, see Inglis (1997). The major ideologies of people’s efforts referred to are Jothiba Phuley, Iyothee Thassar, Periyar, Ambedkar and others.
- 7 References to this section are Galanter (1984), Bajpai (2011) and Jaffrelot (2003); for positive and negative Orientalisms, see Fox (1989).
- 8 Readings for this section are Galanter (1984), Bajpai (2011), Jaffrelot (2003, 2009), Austin (1966) and Yadav (1994). It needs to be noted, however, that while these writings have been relied upon for the data they provide, interpretation of the same is mine, often in variance with those of the different authors. Even with this proviso, the comments of these authors on the issue are clear enough. Bajpai (2011) calls this moment that of “containment,” “cut-back” and “retrenchment” of the group rights established previously. And so does Galanter (1984), who is clear that while the British had two objectives of “political balance between communities” and “amelioration of the lowly,” the Indian agenda was limited to the latter purpose only. Jaffrelot (2009) notes that “the Constitutional Assembly attempted to erase socio-economic distinctions on behalf of the fundamental equality of all the citizens. However, under the cover of such ideological commitments this orientation reflected the hegemonic design of the dominant classes which occupied the upper layers of the Congress Party.” For struggles against such a containment see, Irschik (1969), Jaffrelot (2003), Geetha and Rajadurai (1998).
- 9 Many a reading influenced me in the formulation of this section, and it is difficult to enumerate them. The Original of Mr Nehru’s Objective Resolution could be had in *Constitutional Assembly Debates*, Volume I dated December 13, 1946. For a panegyric of the abstracted individual by Patel, see the same document dated January 24, 1947. The notion of a *tiered society* as envisaged by the nation-makers of India finds resonance with the traditional Indian philosophical notion of *tiered truth*—superior and inferior, harmoniously integrated! On the dichotomy of Rights and Principles, De Swart (2000), writing on behalf of the former states: “With one hand the Constitution grants individual citizens equality before the law, but with the other hand takes it away.” However, with more truth, it could be said on behalf of the Principles that more is taken away than what is being

given! Finally, it is a sad commentary on the scholarship that not a single author has mentioned the total absence of “commensurate policies” for bringing about genuine liberal democracy—uniform and universal education for laying out a level-playing field for formal equality. For these “special measures” are by consensus viewed as merely temporary. By default then, they have all accepted the reluctant, meager and token measures for different underprivileged groups as sufficient to bring about such an equalization. As a point of fact, this is not merely an omission, for the nationalist agenda is to bring about unity/homogeneity. And the basis of such a process of homogenization unfortunately by default has been “culture” instead of “power” as is required for an individuated liberal democracy.

- 10 The question of shame/shamelessness of branding the majority population as “backward” was indeed raised by Beteille (2002), but casually suggests that even through this demeaning identification, the struggle continues. This critical reading of the backward classes discourse does not mean that the present scheme of “reservations” could be simply disposed of. But it does mean that people’s consciousness and conscious efforts should not be limited to struggling within the given parameters, but extended to questioning, exposing and transforming these parameters themselves in the service of social emancipation.

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# 21

## MODERNIZATION, SOCIAL EXCLUSION AND EMPOWERMENT OF OBCS IN INDIA

### A study of Gujarat

*Santosh Kumar and D. Sriram*

Academic interest in studying the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) has gained ground in the past few decades. This compels and merits reflections on the OBCs becoming an issue for debates on public policy formulation and implementation pertaining to them. Transforming India into an egalitarian society, strengthening its unity and integrity will remain a dream as long as the wide gap between the attitudes of the upper castes and the low castes, that is, the rich and poor, does not change significantly for the better. Such change cannot be brought about overnight. Centuries-old caste and religious prejudices and practices which have become ingrained in the social-cultural milieu and mindset cannot be uprooted so easily. It is a long-term process, yet imperative. To bring all those who are considered socially and economically backward on par with the rest of the society they need to be assisted in all possible ways, especially by the government. Notwithstanding the opposition of the upper castes to special measures to assist the OBCs, it is the constitutional obligation of the government under Articles 340(1), 340(2) and 16(4) to promote the welfare of the OBCs.

Gujarat presents a fascinating case study for the understanding of the caste system. In the context of Gujarat, the difficulty of a “caste” is evident as instead of clear-cut “building-block,” there are multiple levels of subdivisions, so that a “caste” is little more than a category uniting numbers of internally inter-marrying subgroups. These are sometimes ranked, sometimes equal. When ranked, their relative position may be reversed from one subregion to another. It is interesting to note, as has been highlighted in the literature, that hierarchy runs across caste barriers and encompasses castes (Tambs-Lyche 2010).

Keeping these larger issues as the background, this chapter attempts to explore the category “Other Backward Castes” in the specific context of Gujarat. The investigation and exploration of the historical evolution, the political and social mobilization, the economic interest of the community—internally as well as externally, *vis-à-vis* other castes, presents an understanding of the OBCs in Gujarat. The chapter further seeks to understand, in contemporary times, whether

the status of the OBCs, from the point of view of the various state policies, has been enhanced and if they have benefited from the various schemes and programs or not.

An attempt has been made to understand, if in the process of implementation of the various policies, have the various lower castes, especially within the larger category of OBCs been facing further fragmentation and alienation. Gujarat has been projected to be presenting a “model of development.” The authors have made an attempt to explore whether in this model of development, the OBCs are adequately represented, or remain marginalized and excluded from the “mainstream” development discourse.

While the study is based on secondary sources, it has also used the data from the various Government of Gujarat websites to get a picture of the status of OBCs. In areas where the government data could not be accessed, even that has been taken from secondary sources. However, given an option, the authors would like to expand the scope of the study, the empirical tools of data collection and analysis.

### **Backdrop: The illustration and status of the OBCs**

On January 26, 1950, India became a republic by adopting the constitution. With the adoption of the constitution, the *Manusmriti*, a codebook of *Brahmin Dharma* became null and void in the legal framework of the Republic of India. However, it remained operational informally, by retaining the hierarchy of extreme inequality. Though the political, social and educational rights of the OBCs were legally recognized, in reality, OBCs were and are deprived of political power, social prestige and education.

OBCs are the administrative categories, and generally comprehended as the “middle castes.” Historically, the term “OBC” was widely used by the British administration and had come to mean “the Other Backward Castes” by administrative usage. It is used in the Constitution of India to point towards backward classes other than Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs). Article 15(4) refers to them as “socially and educationally backward classes of citizen,” and Article 340 as “socially and educationally backward classes.” Article 16(4) mentions “backward class of citizen,” and Article 46 refers to “the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of the people” (Shah 1992).

However, it has also been explained in the literature that the process of industrialization destroyed the traditional businesses of OBCs. In the new industrial system, OBCs became bankrupt and lost their age-old vocations which were their only means of livelihood. In the process, these originally creative, hardworking entrepreneurs were converted into laborers or workers (Desai 1984, Shah 1992, Desai and Dubey 2011). The status of an average person from the OBCs today is that s/he is employed as a Class III/IV worker in the government, works as menial a laborer in the unorganized sectors, is a part-time worker or is jobless. This may be a unique example in the history of mankind where a huge population that is immensely skilled, has been reduced to wage laborers, rendered unemployed and pauperized (Yadav 2002, Ramaiah 1992).

In Gujarat, OBCs could not become owners or entrepreneurs in their traditional vocations or professions in the contemporary economy. They were reduced to mere workers with upper castes snatching the ownerships or entrepreneurship. Oilmen (*Teli*), salt producers (*Agaria*), carpenters (*Sutar*), weavers (*Koshti* and fishermen (*Koli*) do not own the oil, salt, furniture, textile and fisheries business enterprises, respectively. Despite traditional knowledge and expertise in their respective areas of business and skills, OBCs are reduced to daily laborers.

Industrialization that had no concern for the socially unprivileged people of society resulted in wiping out several businesses based on their traditional vocations and proficiencies, pauperizing respective castes ruthlessly. Potters (*Kumbhar*), artisans producing bangles and non-precious

metal ornaments (*Kasar*), basket weavers (*Burud*) and stoneware artisans (*Patharwat*) are some of the castes devastated by so called modern industrialization.

A majority of OBCs are semi-nomadic, as their vocations demanded them to wander from place to place in search of work and a livelihood. Therefore, their social structure was already relatively weak. On being pauperized and reduced to being daily wage laborers migrating from one place to another or to urban slums as an unskilled labor force, their social structure was destabilized and caste members dispersed over vast areas forcing them to lose their community bonding and cultural life, in fact their very identity. The traditional institution of the caste council (*Jat Panchayat*) became defunct, creating serious obstacles for resolving normal family and social issues.<sup>1</sup>

The societal profile of OBCs is, therefore, an extremely loose conglomeration of innumerable castes, most of which are internally destroyed. Consequently, they are neither socially nor politically organized. Therefore, despite having common social and educational problems, they are unable to assert their rights. In fact, not many of them are aware of their constitutional rights related to reservations (Patel 2005, 2006).

In Gujarat, the lower classes are the three dominant socio-economic and demographic components of the population: SCs comprising 11.3 percent of the population, STs 16.5 percent and the OBCs 43 percent. The India Human Development Report, 2011, calculating from the National Sample Survey (NSS; conducted by the government of India) 64th Round thus puts lower castes and classes at almost 70 percent of the population (India HDR 2011). There are 145 castes included in the OBC category.

### **The context of Gujarat**

The people of Gujarat are proud inheritors of the legacy of great leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi and Sardar Patel. As Desai puts it, “Complete dedication to duty, love for justice and progress through peaceful methods are the characteristics of the Gujarati community” (Desai 1970). Caste is understood as a series of hierarchically ordered occupational and ritually specialized categories of rulers, merchants and artisans. Relations among the various caste categories are consolidated by way of formalized ritual relations. Shah and Desai have expounded that

In Gujarat, caste hierarchies do not take this form, and ritual relations tend towards the informal, especially in the middle order, and Brahmins, when compared to the rest of the society, is a rather marginal figure with other non-Brahmin castes also occupying powerful ritual positions. This is not to say that Brahmins are not powerful in the state, but they are materially so only in alliance with the cohort of materialistic castes, or Vanias.

(Shah and Desai 1988)

Thus, Shah and Desai have significantly highlighted sociologically, the importance of Vaishnavism and of merchant culture, largely inspiring the stereotypes of Gujarat and the Gujaratis.

Tambs-Lyche emphasizes the existence of the structural differences in the caste relations between the various regions of Gujarat and across the factions with the regions. For him, caste exhibits a “center versus periphery” syndrome; a contrast between the regions, equally present at the caste and village levels, where each village may be seen as central or peripheral in relation to the others (Tambs-Lyche 2010). As regards the evolution of the castes, especially the lower castes, in Gujarat, Shodhan (2010) brings forward a very significant reference in one of the writings of Kavi Dalpatram Dahyabhai (1820–98).

He not only presented traditional histories of the origins of the various castes (*jatis*) listing all the 74 castes of *Brahmins*, *Vaniyas*, *Rajputs* and *Shudras*, but acknowledged the importance of caste groups formed by birth and insisted that they were maintained by social and political rules and customs. While Dahyabhai argued for caste as a social construct at a general all-India level, the data related to individual caste groups were drawn solely from Gujarat. As regards the origin of *Shudras*, his understanding was most pronounced. According to him, “these castes arose from the conquests of the Bhils and Kolis, who were the original residents of Gujarat.” He suggested:

The caste Hindus who had later settled in the region deprived the indigenous population of education and opportunities, causing them to move to “lower” service occupations, and had to remain in this situation as the Kings effectively prevented them from building better homes, or taking up education and better occupations.

(Dahyabhai 1885)

In the Varna order in Gujarat, merchants (Vaishyas) rank second to the Brahmins, unlike the conventional pan-Indian model with Kshatriyas following Brahmins. The expression “Brahmin-and-Vania” was a synonym for “dominant” in Gujarat. Tambs-Lyche, argues that though this characterization worked in central Gujarat, in eastern Gujarat (Saurashtra and Kuchh), Rajputs and other landowning castes remained politically and culturally dominant. Even the *Patidars* in north Gujarat were commonly seen as more martial in character (Tambs-Lyche 2010).

We can conclude that the historical account of the evolution of OBCs in Gujarat provides a picture of caste relations that is not present in other parts of the country. This narrative also presents sufficient indication that the nature of social and political mobilization has also been distinctive in Gujarat. The next section deliberates as to how the uncommon social and political mobilization of the OBCs in Gujarat set the stage for their differential status as the beneficiaries of the various schemes.

### **Social and political mobilization of other backward castes**

The Indian democracy has witnessed different castes and class-based mobilizations. These have been in the nature of social movements, socio-economic, cultural or political mobilizations, or of a sectarian nature on the basis of the identities of castes, gender, class or electoral, peasants, etc. As Patel observes, the OBCs have been trying to liberate themselves by using the available political means and have, in the process, engaged in devising strategies, either to undo or resist the emancipatory project of democratization in India (Patel 2005).

### **Pre-independence Gujarat**

In pre-independence Gujarat, there were different patterns of caste-based mobilizations. Congress was the most important factor behind such mobilizations. As Tambs-Lyche suggests that, by 1938, the Congress Party decided to extend its political agitation to the princely states and chose Rajkot (Saurashtra) to launch its Satyagraha outside British-controlled areas, which met with failure. The *Vaniyas* and some urban groups supported it but there was little or no support from the “allied castes” in rural areas. Thus, while the Congress could mobilize the support of the Brahmins and Vania along with the Kanbis in central Gujarat, the same was not the equation in Saurashtra, where the Rajputs and Kolis supported the Congress (Tambs-Lyche 2010).

## **Post-independence scenario**

In post-independence Saurashtra, in 1952, Congress won with an overwhelming majority. Between 1949 and 1952, the Saurashtra witnessed political upheaval against the center's policies, which indicated the potential beneficiaries of the land reforms among the peasantries (Thorner 1956). Riding on the success of land reforms, the Congress was in a position to dominate the Saurashtra region for the next couple of decades, a phase marked by an urban-led modernization process. This modernization process, along with the infrastructure and economy, also affected religion and ideology. The mercantile values opposed the *shakti*-worshipping traditions, martial and food traditions of Saurashtra hinterlands, and its "thirteen castes," which were mostly OBCs, and which had profited from the reservation policies being implemented in the 1980s and 1990s (Shani 2007).

Gujarat gained the status of a state after the linguistic reorganization of the states on May 1, 1960. And since then, it has remained a site for various contestations, mobilizations and movements. Shah, on the sociological mobilization, however, maintains that Gujarat did not have significant number of radical groups—Hindu left, Gandhians, liberals, socialists, etc., nor it had witnessed any anti-Brahmin or backward-caste movement. Some religious sects mobilized backward castes with a view to *Sanskritize* social customs. Since the early 20th century several OBCs have followed the path of *Sanskritization* for upward mobility. A section of Kolis of central and northern Gujarat claim the *Kshatriya* status, and in course of time, also donned the sacred thread (Shah 2002). In the 1950s and 1960s, the *Gujarat Kshatriya Sabha* reinforced and legitimized their claims and sentiments of being *Kshatriya*.

Post the creation of the state, the state witnessed the Navnirman Movement in 1974, mostly against price rises, corruption, etc. leading to the dismissal of the Chimanbhai Patel government. The character of the movement was essentially a middle-class mobilization dominated by the urban-middle class educated youth, whose ambitions were also becoming curtailed due to the inadequate employment opportunities (Khare 1998, Kohli 2012). This changed the class character and political agenda of future mobilizations.

One of the most noteworthy mobilizations was targeted at lower class socio-political mobilization, ascendance and prominence in Gujarat's democratic politics. It was initiated by a Gandhian stalwart, Jhinabhai Darji, in the Congress's organizational structure during the 1970s. Darji was able to successfully forge an alliance of the numerically numerous but neglected castes/communities of the "have-nots," namely, the lower OBC-Kshatriya, Harijans, Adivasis and Muslims referred to as KHAM (Shah 1998).

KHAM as an alliance, unsettled the upper castes and classes, represented by Patels/Patidars, Vaniyas and Brahmins, who were the beneficiaries of their colonial connections. KHAM also was responsible for the corrosion and alienation of the upper caste and class base of Congress. Unfortunately, KHAM, though it electorally changed the political equations, could not deliver on the policy issues in a significant manner. Yet, Patel observes, some policies of this period were made to change the laws governing land ownership and cooperative sector (Patel 2005). Patel presents a very interesting account of how reservation policies of the 1980s and the KHAM led to a clash of two socio-political mobilizations with distinct class-character and content—the first was led by the Patels and other upper castes against the reservation, and the second was the withering and collapsing of the KHAM communities under the strategies of the upper-caste forces. Thus, Gujarat witnessed KHAM mobilization losing to the anti-poor dominant class and caste forces, which in turn led to creating rightist, rapidly communalized, sectarian mobilization (Patel 1999).

In the late 1980s, probably for the first time in independent India, a modern industrial metropolis experienced extreme forms of caste violence. The clashes between the *savarnas* and the Dalits

in the industrial periphery of Ahmedabad gradually evolved into a caste war that spread to the towns in 18 out of the then 19 districts. In many villages dominated by land-owning Patidars in north and central Gujarat, Dalit *bastis* or localities, were burnt. Caste tensions resurfaced in 1985 in the second anti-reservation agitation. The issue this time was the increase in job quotas for the non-*Dalit* socially and educationally backward castes; yet the victims were all Dalits (Yagnik 2002). As a result of these two agitations, the Brahmin-Bania-Patidar combine acquired a *savarna* unity.

Though at the national level, the OBCs as a category emerged and became prominent post-Mandal, in Gujarat this process had begun much earlier. The *Paksh Alliance* (Patidar + Kshatriya) of the 1960s provided a social basis to Swatantra Party. However, there is a serious lack of specific in-depth and exclusive studies on OBCs, and the focus on OBCs has created a debatable confusion rather than clarity (Shah 1975).

As Patel puts it succinctly,

It is too widespread, amorphous, multi-layered and generic a category to be analytically used with any meaningful precision. New subcategorizations, which have emerged while analyzing all-India electoral data, collected in the 1990s are upper OBCs, peasant OBCs, lower class OBCs, artisan OBCs, landless OBCs and so on.

(Patel 2005)

Sanghvi substantiates these observations as follows:

Several caste names like Parmars, Vaghelas, Solankis, Makwanas, Rathods, etc., originally belonging to upper castes like Rajputs are adopted by the intermediate castes of Darjis and Mochis and lower castes like Vagharies and Bhangis. This has proved the task of politico-sociological analysis quite difficult as caste names alone do not help much but its occupational history is a determining factor. In Gujarat, much before the Mandal some of the OBCs were listed as SEBCs or *Baxi Panch Castes*.

Lancy Lobo, in his significant work, analyzed the ascendancy of a very prominent OBC caste, the Koli (Lobo 2006). The findings of the study provide a larger picture of the OBCs in general. According to the 1931 census, the Kolis, who are the largest caste group in Gujarat, had a population of 23 percent of the total Hindu population and 20 percent of the general population. It is believed that their proportion to the total population has remained the same (Lobo 1995). By this assumption, today they must be about 1.2 crore in number. The Kolis have settled across a wide area. They coexist with Bhils in tribal areas and are spread in most rural areas of the whole state. Koli is a generic as well as specific caste name. Two main types of Kolis are *Talpada* and *Pardeshi*. Some subcaste names like Idaria, Palia, Chunualia and Debariya suggest the place of their origin whereas others like Pagi and Kotwal suggest occupation.

The other confusing list of their caste names comprises Bariya, Bhalia, Khout, Patanwadia, Dharala, Patelia, Motia, Thakor, Rathwa, Gulam, etc. The caste name Thakor is used as a more honorific, high sounding and high-status symbol than Koli. The variety of caste names impedes the process of their categorization as lower, middle or upper classes (Lobo 1995). OBCs demonstrate a great deal of occupational and regional social variation. Some of the coastal OBCs do fishing for their livelihoods. In other areas, they work as agricultural laborers, tenants or small farmers. After 1947, voting rights have empowered them politically a great deal and have raised their political consciousness.

There are two groups of OBCs—one, which benefits from reservation and the other, which, despite having the same caste name does not get the benefits of reservation. Besides, the ruling

on the creamy layer among OBCs has come into effect which bars them from benefiting from the reservation quota. There is a widespread resentment against this and efforts of conscientization are on.

Unlike SCs and STs, the OBCs have missed a historical opportunity of voluntary and socially constructive initiatives. Without achieving adequate levels of sustained mobilization and conscientization, the OBCs took a hasty and blind plunge to take political advantage. This did not help them substantially. As a result, they politically oscillated from one political party to the other without really benefiting socio-economically (Patel 2005). Lobo observes that from four members of legislative assembly in 1952, the Kolis rose to 40 in 1980. First, they went with the Congress, then in the 1960s with the Swatantra Party, then again back to the Congress as a component of KHAM and finally to the BJP as a part social base of Hindutva (Patel 2005). This however has helped in the formation of elite strata among SCs, STs and the Koli-OBCs (Patel 1999).

The mobilization of the OBCs has been an extremely complex and scattered process. It is not so unusual to find the OBCs maintaining social distance from SCs, with whom they otherwise have a political alliance. There is a social contradiction in this political togetherness which prevents the emergence of progressive and meaningful political mobilization and alliance between the SCs and OBCs. The OBCs along with the *savarnas* are the perpetrators of atrocities on SCs in Gujarat and as a result, their role in anti-reservation agitation was that of a reluctant, strategic and tactful involvement. The ideology of *Hindutva* has been used for sectarian mobilization and it has brought OBCs to BJP since the 1990s.

### **Issues of inclusion, exclusion and empowerment of OBCs**

Exclusion is defined as a social process which involves denial of fair and equal opportunities to certain social groups in socio-political and economic spheres, resulting in the inability of individuals from excluded groups to participate in the basic political, economic and social functioning of the society. There are three defining characteristics of social exclusion particularly relevant as well, (a) unequal opportunity in multiple spheres; (b) some particular caste/groups are wholly or partially excluded of participation in society; and (c) lack of freedom of particular caste or group (Thorat and Newman 2010). Social exclusion has a considerable impact on excluded castes or groups and society. Discrimination is clearly a particular kind of exclusion. And it can take on an active or passive form (Thorat and Newman 2007). With this conceptual understanding of exclusion, the following section attempts to understand the various contexts of inclusion, exclusion and empowerment of the OBC community in Gujarat.

### ***The context of land***

Land is a most influential asset for socio-economic status in society. Agriculture and its related activities are the main income sources in rural areas. Though the land is the people's livelihood, development projects treat it as a commodity. Most of those who sustain themselves on this common property resource are tribal, and persons belonging to the poorest among the OBCs, such as quarry and fish workers.

Backward communities have no or low landholding in the state and also at the national level. They sustain themselves by rendering services to the villages as agricultural workers and other professions. Figure 21.1 shows that there is a higher percentage of Dalits who have less than five acres landholding and medium and large farmers belonging to the "Other" category of the caste groups, have landholding of more than five acres. Although this chart has shown Dalits as

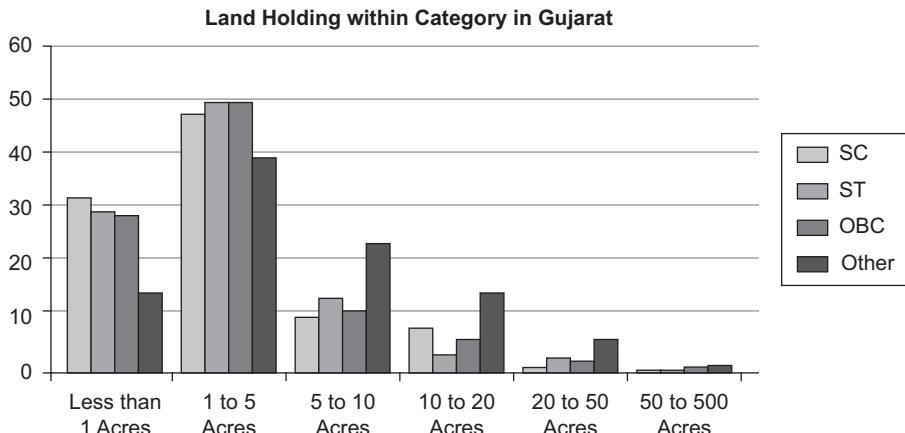


Figure 21.1 Category-wise distribution of land in Gujarat 2005–6 (percent). Source: Deshpande, 2011.

landholders, they are merely landholders on paper; the other dominant castes have not given them the land rights.

There are some specific land-related amendments which have enabled the redistribution of land to them, yet the number of such beneficiaries is low (Lobo 2009, Deshpande 2011). The project-related displacement presents complexities at a different level, where the communities have most of the time been the losers.

The Green Revolution in Gujarat began through agricultural initiatives in Anand and Kheda districts. Subsequently, it ushered in a high productivity phase in districts such as Vadodara, Mehsana, Surat, Rajkot, Jamnagar, Junagadh, Amreli and other areas of Saurashtra. The fertile belt, known as Charotar, between Anand and Kheda districts had no complaints about the land acquired for the canals or roads in the name of development. These projects were utilizing acquired government and pastureland, on which the Dalits and OBCs depended and therefore, the government taking over their land affected them badly.

There has been a sizeable population among the socially and economically marginalized sections who have been displaced and rehabilitated. As regards the alienation and rehabilitation due to the various development projects, especially related to the dams, roads and canals, a majority of the people displaced were lower OBCs and STs. However, while most of the STs were rehabilitated, the OBCs were left to either self-rehabilitate or be excluded (Lobo 2009). In the instance of rehabilitation of those impacted by the Bhuj earthquake in 2001, there was selective surveying and rehabilitation of the OBC community. A decline was reported among various communities of the *patta*-holding farmers, *patta* being the ownership deed. The highest decline of the *patta*-holders was reported among the STs, but significantly, also among the OBCs (68 percent and 46.2 percent, respectively). In the case of the non-*patta* or leased lands, the decline was acute among the OBCs, mostly in central and northern Gujarat. In the industrial projects, there was a decline in land ownership among tribals and Dalits, whereas an increase was recorded among the OBCs (Lobo 2009).

### Economic and entrepreneurial development

Gujarat is being widely projected as the “model state” which others must follow. The state’s economy, it is claimed, has been growing at the rate of around 10 percent per annum. Expanding

industrialization is said to be the key to this growth and increasing commercialization of agriculture. Several questions have been raised regarding the reliability of the data provided by the state government, especially on the rate of agricultural growth. Even if one agrees that these data are accurate, the fact is the state government has been pursuing policies of the free market and neoliberal economists such as Bibek Debroy and Jagdish Bhagwati have supported the policies maintaining that economic growth would result in improvements in the social sector too (Iyer 2013). In the following pages, we discuss the impact of economic development through entrepreneurial development on caste structures.

The caste system was not only a scheme of social stratification, but also a division of labor. Caste came with an ascribed profession, and with limited flexibility. Change came with the rise of the democratic politics as the lower castes constituted the majority of the country's population and were supported by the democratic force of the country (Varshney 2000). While the representation of the SCs, and STs in the elected legislatures has been ensured through the reservation processes in democratic politics, an OBC revolution could enable the OBCs too to move into political power (Jaffrelot and Kumar 2009).

Some scholars argue that OBCs are traditionally the “middle” caste, not suffering the extreme social and economic discrimination as SCs or enjoying the social privileges of the upper castes. While OBC reservation was implemented throughout the country only in the 1990s, OBCs in the southern states of India had been getting the benefits since the 1960s and even earlier in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. The study by Iyer, Khanna and Varshney presents an interesting dimension of the economic development using the ownership of entrepreneurship across the caste lines. The data on Gujarat shows that the OBCs' share in enterprise ownership and employment generation increased significantly since 1998 and by 2005, it was very much in proportion with the size of their population.

The study further highlights that Gujarat had a very high economic growth rate during 1999–2008 (8.5 percent growth in GSDP as compared to 7.2 percent nationwide) and showed a large increase in the share of the workforce employed in OBC-owned enterprises over the period of 1998–2005 (from 22 percent to 39 percent), suggesting that caste barriers were, to a large extent, breaking up. This growth in the OBCs' share of the entrepreneurial activities was way ahead of the SCs at 7 percent for the same reference period. Historically, the mercantile activities formed the primary identities of the lower castes, and the caste identities were accorded a secondary status. Further, the pro-OBC policies by the Government of Gujarat such as the Scheme of Assistance to Voluntary Organizations for the Welfare of Other Backward Classes helped in increasing enterprise ownership by the OBC community in Gujarat.

## **Social sector funding in Gujarat**

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) report, “State Finances: A Study of Budgets of 2013–14” (RBI 2014), recounted that the Gujarat government had not been spending an adequate amount on the social sector despite its poor human development indicators. The report pointed out that across India, “the expenditure pattern revealed an improvement in quality, as reflected in sharp increases in development expenditure, particularly the social sector expenditure.” The RBI report confirms that Gujarat has failed to improve upon its social sector expenditure in the recent past. In fact, if the report is any indicator, overall spending on the social sector which includes not just education and health but also expenditure on rural development, food storage and warehousing, has stagnated over the last four years.

## State of affairs pertaining to healthcare in Gujarat

A study, “Inequity in Maternal Health Care Service Utilization in Gujarat: Analyses of District-Level Health Survey Data,” carried out by four prominent scholars, Deepak Saxena, Ruchi Vangani, Dileep V. Mavalankar and Sarah Thomsen, and published in a Swedish research journal, *Global Health Action*, concluded that “inequities in maternal health care utilization persist in Gujarat,” despite Gujarat being “one of the most economically developed states of India” (Saxena 2013). It underlined,

Structural determinants like caste group, wealth, and education were all significantly associated with access to the minimum three antenatal care (ANC) visits, institutional deliveries, and use of any modern method of contraceptive. There is a significant relationship between being poor and access to less utilization of ANC services independent of caste category or residence.

The study concluded that,

Social class is considered to be the most powerful predictor of health results worldwide. In India, social class is divided along caste and tribal affiliation. The category of “scheduled tribe” is generally the poorest and most disadvantaged in terms of health outcomes, although SCs and “other backward castes” (OBCs) also experience greater levels of social exclusion and marginalization compared to members of the other castes. For example, according to the third National Family Health Survey (NFHS-3), access to any ANC during the last birth in the previous five years was only 73.9 per cent for STs, and around 85 per cent for both SCs and OBCs, while it was 95.3 per cent for others.

Supplementing the finding of this study is another study on “Access to Health Care and Patterns of Discrimination: A Study of Dalit Children in Selected Villages of Gujarat and Rajasthan” carried out for UNICEF and the Indian Institute of Dalit Studies, Delhi (Acharya 2010). The study found that among all caste categories—non-Dalit, OBC and Dalit—girls missed vaccinations at a higher rate than boys in both urban and rural districts. The differences were most significant in non-Dalit and OBC children, although Dalit girls were also missed in vaccinations more often than Dalit boys. Among ages 3–5 the differences between girls’ and boys’ missed vaccination rates were most significant: 3.1 percent of non-Dalit boys received ≤1 Oral Poliovirus Vaccine dose, whereas the rate was 5.8 percent for non-Dalit girls; 2.8 per of OBC boys received ≤1 OPV dose, while the rate was 7.7 percent for OBC girls; and 14.4 percent of Dalit boys went unvaccinated while the rate for girls was 16.4 percent. Figure 21.2 presents the data.

Saxena *et al.* suggest that

Gujarat has experienced rapid growth and is one of the wealthiest states in India and also showing improvement in overall health status. However, improvements in the health of the general population do not lead to the removal of disadvantage in society. To achieve the desired targets under Millennium Development Goals in an equitable manner, there is an urgent need to review the existing policies implemented by the state to reduce such health inequalities. Furthermore, the State of Gujarat should also design systems to monitor equity. Greater attention needs to be directed towards the assessment of health deprivation among the poor.

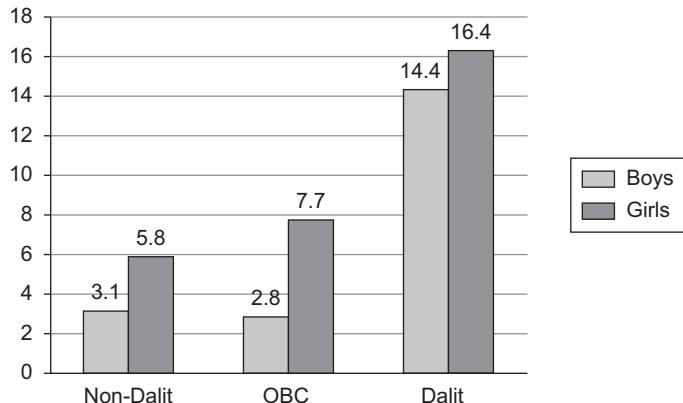


Figure 21.2 Gender differences in missed vaccinations. Source: Acharya, 2010.

They add,

Availability alone may not be sufficient, unless it is supported by a policy of greater subsidization of health facilities through special schemes for maternal health care.

Targeted interventions need to be initiated for better delivery of services and tools directly to those who are in greatest need. Additionally, decisions on resource allocation for public health need to be taken along with other pertinent factors, which will affect the efficacy of the policy matrix in total, such as poverty rates and education. Perhaps the state should recognize the fact that expenditures on health and education are complementary in nature and, if combined, will produce large individual and social benefits. In this sense, this analysis may help the policy planners and hopefully provide a road map for the path ahead.

### Educational development and OBCs

In a report, prepared by the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), huge gaps in female education levels of Gujarat, especially among those belonging to the three socially deprived groups, STs, SCs and OBCs have been reported. Findings have been reported in the NSSO report, "Employment and Unemployment Situation among Social Groups in India." The survey (rural plus urban) results show that in the age group 5–14, 75.1 percent of ST females attended any educational institution; this dropped to 22.4 percent in the age group 15–19, and further to 1.8 percent in the age group 20–24. If the survey results are to be believed, there is not much of a difference for SCs and OBCs, either. Worse, in each of these social groups, Gujarat ranks rock-bottom among Indian states as far as females attending educational institutions are concerned.

However, although no statistics of socially and economically backward castes (OBCs) are compiled, their proportion in the total population, especially in rural areas in Gujarat, is believed to be quite significant and educational attainment among them quite low. A few micro-level studies carried out during the 1980s and early 1990s at the Gujarat Institute of Development Research in various districts of Gujarat have highlighted the fact that literacy rates among OBC girls were as low as those reported among tribal girls living in remote areas. In a census of 12 villages in Gandhinagar district, which is the state capital, carried out in 1992, it was observed that 28 percent

of girls aged 6–14 belonging to the OBC community were never enrolled in school and an additional 12 percent had dropped out compared to 5 percent of SC girls living in the same villages who were not enrolled and 4 percent who had dropped out (Visaria 1993). The Gandhinagar district villages that were surveyed were within 10–20 km of Ahmedabad city and also the state capital. A similar situation with respect to children belonging to OBCs was observed in Surendranagar district in Saurashtra region and also in Baroda district, where village censuses were conducted.

The situation is likely to have improved in the intervening 13–14 years, but the reasons reported for not sending girls to school need to be further explored. Several of the communities classified as backward reported that they have no tradition of sending daughters to school. Further, in view of the nomadic characteristics of some of the communities, a uniform pattern of setting up stationary schools at one location or in their villages of origin and providing education there would not work.

The NSSO study suggested that, among SCs, 71.2 percent of females in the age group 5–14 years were found to be attending an educational institution, which is down to 18 percent in the age group 15–19 years, and further to 7.2 percent in the age group 20–24 years. As for OBCs, 78 percent of females attended an educational institution in the age group 5–14; this went down to 23.8 percent in the age group 15–19, and further to 2.5 percent in the age group 20–24. While in every state the percentage of females attending an educational institution decreases with an increase in the age group, things are not as bad as with Gujarat. One can safely conclude that the Narendra Modi government's drive to create awareness to educate young females through the scheme of *Kanya Kelavni*,<sup>2</sup> begun in 2004, has been a miserable failure. The state policy makers would do well to do some re-thinking about their strategy to send *babus* for just three days every year for the drive. No follow-up action is ever contemplated. Help from voluntary agencies is never sought.

A comparison with other states reveals where Gujarat stands. First the status of STs: Gujarat stands third lowest with 75.1 percent of female STs in the age group 5–14 attend an educational institution; Rajasthan with 70.2 percent and Andhra Pradesh with 69 percent being the lowest. Even Bihar was better with 76.9 percent. Other states' performance is also worth noting: Assam Odisha had the highest female enrolment of 86.9 percent followed by Odisha with 86.6. Chhattisgarh with 84.7 percent, Jharkhand with 81.9 percent, Madhya Pradesh with 83 percent and Uttar Pradesh with 87.4 percent were all ahead of Gujarat.

Again, in the age group 15–19 years, Gujarat is fourth from the bottom and in the age group 20–24, Gujarat's 1.8 percent is the worst.

A similar situation is found in the case of SC females attending an educational institution. Gujarat figured second to last with 71.2 percent of female SCs in the age group 5–14 attending an educational institution. Jharkhand was at the bottom with 59.8 percent. In the age group 15–19, with 18 percent of SC females attending an educational institution, Gujarat figures at the bottom. And in the age group 20–24, the corresponding figure for Gujarat is 7.2 percent, followed by Haryana (4.1 percent), Jharkhand (2 percent), Karnataka (5.3 percent), Rajasthan 3.4 percent) and West Bengal (4.4 percent).

As for OBC females, Gujarat's 78 percent in the age group 5–14 is worse than all states except Bihar (72.6 percent); in the age group 15–19, Gujarat's 23.8 percent is worse than all states, including Bihar (42.1 percent). Again, in the age group 20–24, Gujarat's 2.5 percent is worse than all the Indian states. Even for higher castes, categorized as "others," Gujarat's young females do not show a better performance than most of the Indian states, although in this category here there is slight improvement.

Glancing through overall literacy figures (of the five-plus age group), there is reason to believe that other states, including the states so far identified as BIMARU (developmentally

backward states of Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh), are all set to overtake Gujarat in the future. This can be concluded from the fact that Gujarat's overall literacy figures for the three social groups is not as bad as many states and is almost equal to the national average. However, it is the younger group of 5–24 that Gujarat fares badly. Overall literacy figures show Gujarat's 54 percent of ST females are literate, while the all-India average is 54.4 percent. Gujarat's literacy among SC females is 56.7 percent as against the all-India figure of 55.5 percent. And as for OBC females, Gujarat's literacy levels are 61.6 percent, as against the all-India figure of 62.1 percent. Table 21.2 shows how things deteriorate if one examines the younger age groups going to educational institutions.

### **Other empowering policies**

Although the performance of the Gujarat government is mixed in the health and education sectors, it has implemented several policies for the economic uplift of the OBCs, especially women and youth. These are as follows:

1. New Swarnim Schemes for Women Entrepreneurs.
2. Scheme for Women's Self-employment.
3. Financial Help for the Youth for Self-employment.
4. Training Scheme for the Youth.
5. Scheme for the youth Artisans of Gujarat.

The data from the various departments of the Government of Gujarat suggest that there are a good number of beneficiaries from among the OBCs, though this could not be ascertained as the data is not supported through an empirical tool.

### **Conclusion**

The enterprising population of Gujarat, supported by its progressive leadership has brought the state to the forefront of development in the country. In the process, the economy of Gujarat achieved a highly diversified economic structure. The process of this economic diversification, however, does not seem to be sustainable as the primary sector, and particularly agriculture, has lagged far behind, distorting the agriculture-industry linkages. Alongside near-stagnation of agriculture, the environment has also experienced severe degradation, both of these have created constraints on the sustainability of economic growth in the state.

The limited achievements of the state in the fields of employment and poverty as well as in human development are closely related to the macro-development path. That is, these developments are not independent of each other, but are the consequences of the dynamics of development of the state. The corrective interventions on a program basis have therefore a limited role to play. Since the decline in the rate of poverty, the backlog of unemployment, the poor quality of employment, the fast-degrading environment as well as the deceleration in the rate of progress in human development are all related to the development model chosen by the state; corrections are needed in the model. For this purpose, it is critical that the lower castes, especially OBCs, are firmly mainstreamed in the policy implementation. Human development cannot be achieved if the policy implementation is not in favor of the impoverished and the marginalized people.

Though direct interventions are necessary and there is good scope for their improvement in the state, these are not sufficient for achieving the goals of development. It is important that

*Table 21.1 State-wise Expenditure under the Pre-Matric/Post-Matric and Hostels for OBC Students (2011–12), in Rs Lakh.*

ROC:3601	State/union territory	Pre-matric scholarship for OBC students		Post-matric scholarship for OBC students		Hostel for OBC boys & girls		Assistance to voluntary organizations working for the welfare of OBCs	
		NA	Funds released (Rs Lakh)	NA	Funds released (Rs Lakh)	NA	Funds released (Rs Lakh)	NA	Funds released (Rs Lakh)
1	<b>Andhra Pradesh</b>	318		3545	4615.72	281			
2	<b>Bihar</b>	390	131.67	4344	5656.17	345			
3	<b>Chhattisgarh</b>	96		1067		85			
4	<b>Goa</b>	6		63	78.14	5			
5	<b>Gujarat</b>	227	288	2528	1334	200		2.31	
6	<b>Haryana</b>	95		1063	1378.07	84			
7	<b>Himachal Pradesh</b>	26	103	289	74	23			
8	<b>Jammu &amp; Kashmir</b>	47		523	307.49	42			
9	<b>Jharkhand</b>	124		1381	1798.16	110			
10	<b>Kerala</b>	125	125	1398	1398	110			
11	<b>Karnataka</b>	230	115	2557	2540.35	203			
12	<b>Madhya Pradesh</b>	273		3038	3955.76	241			
13	<b>Maharashtra</b>	422		4704	6124.9	373		27.02	
14	<b>Odisha</b>	157	157	1754	1114	139	69.5	4.39	
15	<b>Punjab</b>	104		1159		92			
16	<b>Rajasthan</b>	258	309.65	2871	3232.27	228			

Source: Compiled from Planning Commission, 2014.

Table 21.2 Percentage of Females Attending Educational Institutions.

<i>Social groups</i>		<i>Age group</i>	<i>ST</i>	<i>SC</i>	<i>OBC</i>
<b>Gujarat</b>	5–14	75.1	71.2	78	
	15–19	22.4	18	23.8	
	20–24	1.8	7.2	2.5	
<b>All-India</b>	5–14	81.7	83.6	85.8	
	15–19	40.9	46.8	51.8	
	20–24	7.2	7.9	10.8	

(Source: *Employment and unemployment situation among social groups in India*, National Sample Survey, September 2012).

the state shifts towards this path of social development. It is high time that the political leadership in the state realized that attracting industrial investments to the state at any cost will not serve the long-term interests of the state. It will neither lead to sustainable development nor to a rapid reduction of income and human poverty as long as the state does not bring about parity between the castes and treatment by the state.

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### Notes

- 1 As discussed in the OBC Reservation website.
- 2 Girl Child Enrolment Drive, taking place every year during the month of July, beginning in the fresh academic session.

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## 22

# OTHER BACKWARD CLASSES AND STATE POLICIES IN UTTAR PRADESH

*Chitaranjan Das Adhikary*

### Introduction

Other Backward Classes, or more commonly OBCs, refers to a heterogeneous group of *castes* having a common denominator of low social and economic development. Caste as a tag in describing OBCs is a common political refrain in keeping with the Nehruvian ideal of a casteless egalitarian society. This is why “other backward class,” instead of “other backward caste,” is more in vogue. However, the situation of OBCs has an extraordinary and regular alignment with low middle castes; lower caste groups are likely to be members of the OBC group. This leads us to believe, as a matter of fact, that the backward classes are essentially composed of backward castes.

Castes are the building blocks of Hindu social structure. All sorts of virtues and evils have been attributed to the caste system by social historians. In India, the caste system has endured for 3,000 years and even today there are no symptoms of its demise. No social institution containing so large an element of inequality and discrimination against the majority can survive for so long without a carefully crafted machinery cultivated by the forward classes. A similar kind of discrimination is to be found in medieval Europe, but the Indian case is an example of extraordinary institutionalization into permanent patterns of exclusion. Anthropological and sociological accounts of the caste system in different parts of the country (e.g., Ghurey, Hutton, Srinivas, Dubey, etc.) make a compelling case that social and economic backwardness is a consequence of caste discrimination.

OBCs as a relevant development constituency is a post-independence development in India which was nonexistent before the decades of the 1960s. The OBCs we talk about today are also more political in nature than a mere socially and economically backward category. The concern for their welfare under different names, however, is older. In 1918, the Maharaja of Mysore appointed a committee under the chairmanship of L. C. Miller, the then Chief Justice of Mysore. On the basis of the Miller Committee report, the Government of Mysore issued orders in 1921 extending special facilities for the backward communities with regard to education and state services. The first official reference to *other backward classes* is to be found in a report (1931) of the O. H. B. Start Committee, appointed by the Government of Bombay. At the all-India level, the OBCs remained subsumed under the rubric of *Depressed Classes* which also included Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) (criminal tribes). It was only after independence, that the Government of India included the term “socially and educationally backward classes” in

Article 15(4) through the first constitutional amendment in 1951. What followed was a series of efforts to identify universal criteria to identify the OBCs which remains incomplete to this day.

The rise of the OBCs is certainly one of the main developments in the Hindi belt politics over the last 20 years. The OBCs are castes in the Indian social systems that are situated above the untouchables but below the forward castes and the intermediate castes. Early attempts at preparing a list of OBCs in Uttar Pradesh is to be found in the report of the Most Backward Classes Commission set up under the Chairmanship of Chedi Lal Sathi in 1975. The Commission recommended three categories of OBCs, namely, List A, List B and List C (comprising *Muslim Backward Classes*) and recommended different quotas in educational institutions and government jobs for each of the categories. According to the National Backward Class Commission database ([www.ncbc.nic.in](http://www.ncbc.nic.in)) there are 77 castes included as OBCs. However, the state government for the purpose of welfare administration, maintains its own list which at present has 79 groups including Muslims as backward classes (<http://backwardwelfare.up.nic.in>)

This chapter seeks to present a political-economic narrative of OBCs in Uttar Pradesh which also includes the politics and policies on this increasingly important section of society. This study is primarily based on secondary sources of information including books, blogs, websites, newspapers and unpublished scholarly works. The chapter is divided into five sections. Section one seeks to expose the constitutive relationship between other backward castes and socially and economically backward castes within a historico-comparative framework. Section two attempts a bird's eye view of constitutional guarantees available to OBCs in India. Section three briefly touches upon the socio-economic condition of OBCs in Uttar Pradesh. Given the general poverty of OBC-specific data in Uttar Pradesh, the section on socio-economic conditions is meant to serve as a backdrop to the core arguments in this chapter. Section four presents a summary of policies and programs related to OBCs in Uttar Pradesh. Finally, section five focuses on a regime-wise analysis of OBC policies and their emerging contours in contemporary time. The discussion ends with a conclusion on the future trajectory of OBCs and state policies in Uttar Pradesh.

## **Who are OBCs?**

The term “backward classes” which had originally been in use during colonial times had multiple referents but lacked any clearly defined parameters regarding the inclusion and exclusion of groups described collectively as “backward.” In fact, the term, at least in its early usage, denoted an all-encompassing category that included the under-privileged and marginalized castes, tribes and communities. Even at the time when the constitution was being debated and drafted, the definition of the term remained imprecise. In the debates of the Constituent Assembly, there were two broad ways in which the term was used. One was an inclusive group of all sections of society that needed preferential treatment. In such usage, the term “backward classes” included the “untouchables.” In the other usage, the term that was used was “Other Backward Classes.” But the fact remains that the category “backward classes” was not defined as precisely as the categories of SCs and STs were but denoted other categories of people who were under-privileged and marginalized (<http://arc.gov.in>).

It must be recognized that the term “class” is associated with economic category and indicates an “open” status group. By contrast, the backward classes in India form an aggregate of “closed” status groups belonging to these groups by birth and not because of their individual economic characteristics. Backward status is ascribed on the basis of birth into a particular caste. Hence, for all practical purposes the term “backward class” is used for backward castes and the constitution recognizes special provisions for the advancement of any socially and economically backward class.

Information on caste was last collected during the British Raj in 1931. During the early census, people often exaggerated their caste status to garner social status and it is expected that

people downgrade it now in the expectation of gaining government benefits. In 2011, there was a public debate about a caste-based census to find the exact population of OBCs in India. This would have been the first time in 80 years since 1931 that such an exercise was undertaken but the proposal was dropped. The Mandal Commission report of 1980 estimated the OBC population at 52 percent, though the National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO) survey of 2006 put the OBC population at 41 percent.

According to the NSSO report, the reserved social groups, SCs, STs and OBCs constitute about 70 percent of India's population. In terms of the OBC population, while the 2001 census does not give any figures, the NSSO has estimated it to be 41 percent. In the first-ever indication of the concentration of OBCs, the NSSO has found that there are four states, namely, Tamil Nadu, Bihar, Kerala and Uttar Pradesh, where the OBCs constitute more than 50 percent of the population. Uttar Pradesh, the most populated Indian state, has a 54.64 percent OBC population in rural areas, while the figure for urban areas is less than 50 percent.

The constitution refers to the term “backward classes” in Articles 15(4), 16(4) and 340(1). While Articles 15(4) and 16(4) empower the state to make special provisions for any socially and educationally backward class of citizens, Article 340(1) authorizes the appointment of a commission to investigate the conditions of backward classes.

The first Backward Class Commission was appointed in 1953 with Kaka Kalelkar as the chairman in accordance with Article 340 of the constitution. The Commission was asked to determine the criteria to be adopted to provide concessions to the socially and educationally backward classes besides the SCs and STs. The Commission was also asked to prepare a list of such classes. Accordingly, the Commission prepared a list of about 2,399 castes. The Commission report specifically uses the words “classes” and “sections” but not the word “castes” and yet, as explained in the report, the words “sections” and “classes” mean nothing but castes and no other interpretation is feasible. The list prepared for backward classes is deemed to have been made in terms of castes and the term “backward classes” has been used to describe and include “backward castes.” But the constitution does not recognize caste except the SCs.

The Second All-India Backward Classes Commission, or the Mandal Commission, submitted its report in 1980. The Commission evolved 11 indicators—a mix of caste and class features—for assessing social and educational backwardness. It arrived at an exhaustive list of 3,473 castes that were declared as backward. The tangible indicators to ascertain a caste or any social group as backward included their lower position in the class hierarchy, lower age at marriage within the group, higher female work participation, higher school drop-out rate, inaccessibility to drinking water, lower average value of family assets, higher existence of *kutcha* houses (made of mud, wood, straw, etc. which are not permanent) and so on. The report of the Mandal Commission was partially implemented in 1991.

There is no authentic data available even about the size of the population of OBCs, let alone on the other aspects of development to assess their status. However, OBCs by profession, are small cultivators, agricultural laborers, artisans, those engaged in weaving, fishing, construction work, etc. These occupations being common to SCs and OBCs, the status of OBCs cannot be treated as very much different from that of SCs.

### **Constitutional guarantees**

The constitutional provisions for the advancement of socially and educationally backward classes are as follows: a) Clause (4) of Article 15 of the Constitution of India permits the state to make special provisions for the advancement of “any socially and educationally backward classes of citizens” including admission to educational institutions. b) Article 16(4) permits the state

to make provisions for reservation in appointments for “any backward class of citizens ...” c) Article 340 of the constitution provides “that the President may by order appoint a Commission to investigate the conditions of socially and educationally backward classes.” d) Clause (1) of Article 38 of the constitution makes it obligatory for the state to “strive to promote the welfare of the people by securing and protecting as effectively as it may a social order, in which justice, social, economic and political, shall inform all the institutions of the national life.”

The following Constitutional provisions are relevant to our discussion:

**Article 15**, which prohibits discrimination on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth.

**Article 16**, which ensures equality of opportunity in matters of public employment.

**Article 340**, which says that a commission can be appointed by the government to investigate the conditions of and the difficulties faced by the socially and educationally backward classes and to make appropriate recommendations.

**Article 338(5)**, which lists out the powers of the National Commission for Scheduled Castes. Clause (10) of the same Article says that “Backward Classes” are included within the expression “Scheduled Castes.”

### **Socio-economic conditions of OBCs**

No socio-economic survey has been conducted of the OBC in the country. Some state governments have conducted socio-economic surveys of particular segments of the OBCs but there is no comprehensive survey of the socio-economic conditions of the OBCs nationwide. Since 1998–9 some data relating to socio-economic position or status of development of OBCs has started appearing in various surveys. These surveys include, (a) 1998–9: National Family Health Survey; (b) 1999–2000: Consumption Expenditure Sample Survey of NSSO; (c) 1999–2000: NSSO report on Employment; (d) 1999–2000: NSSO Report on Landholdings; (e) 2002–3: NSSO Report on household assets and liabilities or Asset and Debt Survey; and (f) 2004–5: NSSO Draft Report on Employment. The picture that emerges from all the surveys is as follows:

The incidence of poverty among the OBCs is intermediate to that among SCs/STs on the one hand, and the non-SC-ST-OBC (Others) on the other. In general, poverty among SCs/STs is three times that of the “Others,” while for OBCs it is two times that of “Others.” Open unemployment is more or less consistently higher among OBCs than among “Others.” Asset ownership (including land) per household of OBCs is double that of SCs and STs, but only about two-thirds of “Others” in both rural and urban areas. However, the incidence of indebtedness, and consequently the debt to asset ratio, is highest among OBCs of all social groups. It also appears that OBCs borrow a lower proportion of their debt from institutional sources and have higher dependence on informal sources as compared to all the other social groups. The situation of Muslims as one definitive section of the OBCs is no different from the rest of the OBCs.

The National Sample Survey (NSSO; Government of India) 61st Round (2004–5) on household consumer expenditure in the entire country, puts the OBC population in India at 40.94 percent out of which 78 percent live in rural areas. Most of the OBC population (rural 64.1 percent and urban 75.4 percent) have an average monthly per capita expenditure that is below the national level. Similarly, in UP too, the average per capita monthly expenditure of OBCs is below the state average of Rs857.05 with the rural average per capita monthly expenditure of OBCs being Rs528.36 and that of urban OBCs being Rs702.31 ([www.mospi.gov.in](http://www.mospi.gov.in)). In the first-ever indication of the concentration of OBC populations in different states, the NSSO has

found that the OBCs constitute more than 50 percent of the population in the four states of Tamil Nadu, Bihar, Kerala and Uttar Pradesh. With regard to Uttar Pradesh, the most populous Indian state, the OBC population in rural areas constitutes 54.64 percent of the population and 50 percent in urban areas.

### **Welfare programs**

Having recognized that educational and economic support for backward classes was not adequate and that there is disparity between them and the non-backward sections of the population at every level, it was felt that earnest efforts were required to introduce various schemes specifically for the target group in order to provide them a level playing field. Considering that those OBCs living below poverty line form a bigger chunk of the population and there are disparities within the OBCs themselves, the following scholarship provisions in Uttar Pradesh are available to school-going children of OBC parents whose annual income is below the poverty line (<http://backwardwelfare.up.nic.in/schemes.htm>):

#### ***Pre-matric scholarship to the OBCs***

The aim of this scheme is to motivate children of OBCs studying at pre-Matric stage. Scholarships of up to Rs40 per month are awarded to students in classes I to VIII irrespective of parental income. For classes IX and X, the scholarship amount is Rs60 for students whose parents' annual income is Rs30,000 or less. Scholarship disbursements are now fully computerized.

#### ***Post-matric scholarship to the OBCs***

The scheme is intended to promote higher education by providing financial support to OBC students studying at post-Matric/post-secondary levels. The scholarships are awarded to students whose parents' annual income is up to Rs2,00,000. Students who are residing and studying in Uttar Pradesh with an annual income up to Rs1,00,000 get full reimbursement of tuition fees.

#### ***Construction of hostels for OBC boys and girls***

The scheme of construction of hostels for OBC boys and girls has been revised with effect from 2010–11. Each hostel will have facilities for 50 students. The state and the central governments will share the cost of construction in a ratio of 50:50. The scheme aims at providing hostel facilities to students belonging to socially and educationally backward classes, especially from rural areas to enable them to pursue secondary and higher education.

#### ***Assistance to voluntary organizations for welfare of OBCs***

The main purpose of this scheme of grants-in-aid to voluntary organizations is to involve the civil society and non-government sector to improve the socio-economic conditions of OBCs through skill up-gradation in various trades, to enable them to start income-generating activities on their own and get gainfully employed. Under the scheme, financial assistance is provided to non-governmental organizations for imparting vocational training in various trades like typing and shorthand, carpentry, electrician, motor winding and fitting/plumbing, printing/compositing/book-binding, spinning and weaving, TV,VCR and radio repair, etc. The Government of India meets 90 percent of the approved expenditure of the training program.

A program to provide assistance for marriage and treatment of diseases is in operation since 2007–8. The destitute, the disabled and victims of natural calamities among the OBCs are given Rs10,000 for marriage and Rs5,000 for treatment of diseases.

### ***Scheme for computer education***

OBC students below the poverty line are encouraged to go for vocational education and computer training (O level) by reimbursing their tuition fees up to Rs10,000 in institutions recognized by the Department of Electronics and Accreditation courses.

The Corporation was set up in 1989 with an aim helping the OBC unemployed youth below the poverty line with loans for business, education and trade. The different schemes under the Uttar Pradesh Backward Classes Finance and Development Corporation are:

1. Margin Money Loan Scheme: Loans are available for agriculture, trade, small and cottage industry with interest rate of 6 percent per annum.
2. New Swarnima Scheme: Under this scheme, women belonging to backward classes living below the poverty line can obtain loan up to Rs1,00,000 at 5 percent interest.
3. Education Loan: Educational loans are provided to the students of backward classes living below the poverty line for pursuing general/professional/technical courses or training at graduate and/or higher levels. The maximum loan limit is Rs3 lakhs at 4 percent interest per annum.
4. Microfinance Scheme: In collaboration with the National Backward Classes Finance and Development Corporation, New Delhi, this scheme is in operation to finance small and cottage industries through self-help groups. Each beneficiary can avail up to Rs25,000 at 5 percent interest per annum.

### ***Political regimes and OBCs***

***Indian National Congress Approach:*** Politics in Uttar Pradesh during the 1950s and 1960s was a form of coalition of district faction leaders. Factionalism formed an essential element in the first phase of institution building in many states including UP. Politically advanced groups who played an important role in the Indian National Congress (INC) from the colonial period, continued to hold an important position in the post-independence political scene. At the same time, the INC traditionally has paid much attention to the SCs, as a result of which the SCs supported the INC in the elections. The strong tradition of Gandhian campaign of anti-untouchability and the affirmative action to allow the SCs to access to education and bureaucracy facilitated the INC to successfully project itself as the natural representative of the SCs. The Backward Classes Commission was appointed on January 29, 1953, under the chairmanship of Kaka Kalelkar. Its report relied heavily on the concept of caste for defining the OBCs. The report was rejected by Nehru's government.

G. B. Pant, Home Minister in Nehru's government, disapproved of the use of caste as the most prominent criterion for identifying the backward classes. In May 1967, the Nehru government eventually decided that there was no need for an all-India list of OBCs, and consequently, therefore, there was no need for a reservation policy at the center. Even though they were responsible for Article 340 of the constitution, congressmen were obviously reluctant to recognize the lower castes, either because of sheer conservatism or socialist ideas.

Uttar Pradesh has been a battlefield for the national and regional parties that evolved based on the ethnic diversity in the state. The Congress was in power in the state until 1989 and the need and struggle to maintain the party's hegemony started during the 1970s. The Congress targeted votes of the "lower" caste sections of society through anti-poverty programs. Indira Gandhi's 20-Point Program and *Garibi Hatao* were important instruments to win the support of the lower and backward castes. During the period 1971–7, the Congress launched a number of schemes to strengthen its social base among the rural poor, especially the lower castes. The ceiling on landholding was reduced so that surplus land could be distributed amongst the poor. Houses and drinking water wells were provided for the lower castes. The Congress's interventions in the state through populist policies were not based on caste but on the economic class. The Congress co-opted votebank "owners" who were often upper-class landlords, and leaders of the SCs. Until the early 1970s, the upper castes constituted more than 50 percent of members of parliament from north India as against less than 5 percent of intermediate castes and at the maximum, 10 percent for the OBCs. The Congress did not introduce caste-specific policies such as Scheduled Castes (SCs), Other Backward Castes (OBCs) or Muslims. The Congress targeted all the lower classes as one economic category and this thinking of the INC continued into the 1990s.

The first to recognize the importance of the backward castes was probably Ram Manohar Lohia. Lohia was one of the staunchest supporters of positive discrimination or what he called "unequal opportunities," not only in favor of the SCs but also the backward castes. The Janata Dal which was founded on October 11, 1988, amalgamated the factions of Lohia and Charan Singh, another capitalist peasant leader in the western part of Uttar Pradesh. The Janata Dal indeed tended to adopt the socialist program for social justice: It concentrated its attention less on class than on ascriptive groups and turned towards affirmative action as the main remedy. The program adopted by the party during its inaugural session promised that "keeping in view special needs of the socially and educationally backward classes, the party (if voted to power) shall implement forthwith the recommendations of the Mandal Commission." The main achievement of V. P. Singh, as head of the short-lived government at the center, was to make a broad range of castes coalesce under the OBC label. In fact, he made it a relevant category for the lower castes in accordance with the quotas recommended by the Mandal Commission Report.

Most of those who were earlier known as "Shudras," had accepted this administrative definition of their identity in the early 1990s. Thus, the early 1990s were marked by a widening of the divide between upper castes and lower castes, an atmosphere which explains at that time the emotional value of the OBCs as a social category. A new unity helped the OBCs to organize themselves as interest group(s) outside the vertical, clientele-like politics of Congress. The aim was to benefit from the OBCs' main asset, their massive numbers (52 percent of the Indian population) at the time of elections. Indeed, the share of the OBC MPs increased in the Hindi belt because lower caste people became more aware of their common interests and decided not to vote for upper caste candidates anymore. The share of OBCs among the MPs between 1984 and 1998 had increased from 11 percent to 20.8 percent in Uttar Pradesh (Jaffrelot 2003). The rise of the OBCs is, first of all, the rise of the Yadavs and the Kurmis, as their share among the MPs testifies. Together, they represent about 15 percent of north Indian MPs in the 1990s which is equal to the representation of the Brahman or the Rajput MPs.

### ***Approach of Samajwadi Party (SP) regime (1989–91, 1993–5 and 2003–7)***

The SP has heavily relied on mobilization of the OBCs—mainly Yadavs and Pals (cattle-rearing and sheep-grazing castes) and Muslims for electoral support. The main social base of the SP—Yadavs and Pals—is not as poor or as oppressed as the Dalits. The Green Revolution

benefited the upper backward castes of Yadavs and Pals. Samajwadi leader Mulayam Singh was very successful in keeping the rich OBCs (Yadavs and Pals) organized under the SP banner by using political power to benefit his social bases rather than providing them with benefits through formal social welfare policies like his arch-rival Mayawati. He granted many political posts and powerful positions within and outside the government structure to the constituents of his social base. Some other appeasement strategies include favoring Yadavs joining the police force, the introduction of quotas for OBC in the Panchayati Raj system, recruitment into government service including educational institutions, etc. In Mulayam Singh's second term, 900 teachers were recruited by the state government, out of which 720 were Yadavs. In the police force, out of 3,151 selected candidates, 1,223 were Yadavs (*India Today*, October 15, 1999). The Mulayam Singh government amended the Uttar Pradesh Panchayat Act of 1947 to include the 73rd Amendment of the Indian Constitution 1993 (reservation of SCs, women in Panchayati Raj institutions) and added one more modification: it granted a 27 percent quota to OBCs. In addition to the reservation in administration and the local bodies, Mulayam Singh made provisions for 27 percent reservation for OBCs in medical colleges and educational institutions, teaching, engineering and management (Verma 2003).

Since the Yadavs were prosperous, they could not qualify for welfare schemes like housing, pension or informal employment on daily wages. Hence, the Mulayam Singh government provided them with jobs in the public sector. Further, the SP government increased the income limit to provide academic fellowships to OBC students at the middle and higher educational level because the OBCs in UP are not as poor and oppressed as the Dalits are. Mulayam Singh has the support of the Yadavs who are prosperous and considered the "creamy layer" of the OBCs.

In short, the performance of the SP government, during its three tenures at the helm of power in UP on the human development policies front pales in comparison with that of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) governments. The main reason is that the SP's social base (Yadavs) is not as poor as the Dalits, the social base of BSP. In fact, the Yadavs are one of those social groups which most benefited from the Green Revolution of the 1970s and are among the middle-ranking economic classes. Prior to the post-independence land reforms, they were small tenants who used to either plough the lands of big landlords or were part of the share-cropping pattern of the agricultural economy. Being a part of the agricultural production system, and since the Green Revolution benefited small landholdings, the Yadavs were successful in improving their economic conditions substantially. To win over the Yadavs, the SP, unlike the BSP, had to rely mostly on recruitment policies rather than health, education and employment security policies.

### ***Approach of Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) rule (1995, 1997 and 2002–3)***

The formal entry of the BSP into UP politics was in 1985 with the election of Ms Mayawati to the Lok Sabha for the Bijnor constituency. The Congress had failed to repeat its victory of the 1984 general elections in the 1985 assembly elections. The Lok Dal and the Janata Party performed well while the BSP got four percent of the total vote, which was a strong signal of things to come.

The BSP did not play an active role in the Mandal issue apart from supporting the principle of reservation. BSP founder-president Kanshi Ram, while welcoming the reservation for the OBCs, was of opinion that it was not an important issue. He preferred reservation for the land-

less farmers and the laborers of the unorganized sector. He changed his stance later perhaps for political reasons, especially to woo the OBC voters. On different occasions he asserted that “reservation is not our demand but our right” and that “our party will fight until the recommendations of the Mandal Commission are implemented fully.” Reservation, however, according to Kanshi Ram, was a short-term solution. Riding on the success of the Mandal Commission recommendations in 1989, caste-based mobilization had become a guarantee of electoral success. The 1993 elections had marked the culminating point of anti-upper caste mobilization. One outcome was the SP-BSP alliance in 1993 as the united front of the backwards-Dalit forces. However, the coalition government lasted only for 18 months, from November 1993 to June 1995. The breakdown of the alliance points to irreconcilable differences between Dalit and OBC politics in Uttar Pradesh.

The BSP regime in UP was very keen to provide welfare schemes to its support base, especially the Dalits. A privileged class was created among the oppressed partly due to the public policies based on protective discrimination since independence, and it was this class that formed the social base of the BSP, and the party was keen to ensure that similar progress was spread uniformly among the oppressed (Pai 2001). In the beginning, when it joined hands with the SP to form the government in 1993, with Mulayam Singh as the Chief Minister, it could not initiate exclusive programs for its support base. However, when it aligned with the BJP and formed the government, in two tenures in 1995 and 1997, the BSP government was known as the “Dalit Government” for its exclusive human developmental schemes for Dalits and oppressed people under the slogan that the human development of Uttar Pradesh meant the development of the oppressed. The Dalits were the main beneficiaries of the BSP government’s social welfare and development schemes. This caused heartache among the poor people of the other castes. BSP introduced social policies, especially related to health, education, housing, employment and social welfare for the Dalits and other oppressed people. The Ambedkar Rojgar Yojana (Ambedkar Employment Scheme) for Dalit women was launched with an outlay of Rs600 million. The outlay for family health/planning programs was increased and 50 percent of the beneficiaries were Dalits. In 1997, Rs700 million was allocated for setting up schools on the Ashram model for the children of the Balmiki (SC) caste. The state’s gift for Dalit girls on their marriage was increased from Rs5,000 to Rs10,000. A sum of Rs1,000 was provided for medical expenses for every Dalit family. The Ambedkar Village Program (AVP), the largest program to be started for the overall development of a village that had predominantly SC/ST population, strengthened the BSP’s electoral support base. The AVP was actually started by the SP government in 1991. The BSP government made it a priority and implemented efficiently. The BSP’s policies for human development in UP were not merely populist in nature. The government did strive for successful implementation of these policies (though the issue could be debated). The BSP government appointed Dalit officers to important posts of administration to ensure that the exclusive programs started for Dalits were implemented sincerely. One Dalit program officer was posted in every district to oversee the proper implementation of such plans. Mayawati resorted to the strategy of large-scale transfer of officials if they failed to achieve the set targets (Hassan 2002). The BSP also made use of the politics of symbolism to win the sentiments of the Dalit community. Even among the Dalits, some argue, it is the Jatavs/Chamars (caste associated with leather works) who were the principal beneficiaries of BSP rule (Jeffery and Jeffery 2008, Chandra 2004). Even though most of the policy initiatives taken by the BSP government focused on Dalits, some were meant to benefit OBCs and Muslims too. Mayawati even announced that 27 percent share of the state budget would benefit OBCs. She included some new castes in the list of OBCs. Mayawati implemented the recommendations of the Second Backward Classes Commission, which recommended that Muslims too should benefit from the

reservation policy. In 2007, a dramatic change occurred in the social base of the BSP during the state assembly election. The BSP secured a full-fledged majority to form the government in UP. This change was the result of its “social engineering” that co-opted the upper castes, mostly Brahmins, into its social base. Accordingly, the BSP shifted its ideological stance from *Bahujan* (majority) to *Sarvajan* (all people). The BSP government included the higher castes in the set of benefits that had been earlier given to the Dalits exclusively. The agenda of *Sarvajan* was incorporated into the policies and programs of the government.

The BSP changed its political strategy from 2007 onwards due to political compulsions. This change did not alter the scope of the human development policies of the BSP government but led to changes in the coverage of these policies and programs. For example, the AVP of 1995 and 1997 is not very different from the AVP of 2007. Schemes and programs are more or less similar in nature and scale but only the profile of the targeted beneficiaries changed. The benefits that were offered only to Dalits earlier were extended to all in keeping with the meaning of *Sarvajan*. This change happened because of the compulsion of inclusive politics. The BSP had to give benefits even to the upper castes that have always been identified as main culprits causing the deprivation of Dalits.

## Conclusion

Development and social progress of other backward classes in Uttar Pradesh is organically linked to the coming to power of essentially caste-based political parties. As the experience has been different, political parties have adopted different styles to keep their constituencies happy. The four major players, namely Congress (I), Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Samajwadi Party (SP) and Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) have shared power in Uttar Pradesh at different points of time. State policies for OBCs were formulated and implemented mainly by the SP and BSP. As discussed, the BSP has primarily relied on a welfare approach to keep its constituency in good humor, occasionally grafting its sworn enemy, the Brahmins, as seen in its last term. It has also attempted to reach the OBCs as a peripheral group by extending political sympathy, if not benefits.

The SP, in turn, has adopted an approach of political accommodation by giving political and other positions of power to the faction leaders of different capacities from the OBCs. The BSP, during its last term (2007–12), made many tactical blunders. It forged an alliance with the upper caste. It also extended special favor to the *Jatavs* from among the Dalits, a community to which Mayavati belongs. The BSP was routed in the 2012 assembly election replaced by a landslide victory by the SP. For the 2012 assembly election the SP has changed its strategy by attracting youth on the basis of economic backwardness despite their caste. Party president Mulayam Singh Yadav was written off as old and ill, and his “anti-English, anti-computer” stance did not appeal to the young. The party was criticized for patronizing criminals during its previous stints in power. But once Akhilesh Yadav, the son of Mulayam Singh Yadav, became the visible face of the SP, its prospects began to change. At his rallies, he promised free laptops and tablets to students, unemployment wages, free electricity to weavers and jobs to the unemployed in factories which he promised the party would set up if voted to power. He also brought computers into the party office, promised to keep the “goons” out and promised strict punishment for anyone who indulged in any criminal acts. Akhilesh Yadav is an educated person and in sync with the times and he has contributed to policies favoring the youth, providing them with English education and laptops for students. Two years down the line, the approach has been development-led instead of a distinctly OBC-centric politics. However, the landslide victory of the BJP in the assembly elections in 2017, and the appointment of Yogi Adityanath as Chief Minister seem to have changed the OBC/Dalit-focused politics, indeed, the face of UP politics.

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# 23

## THE STATUS OF MUSLIM OBCs IN INDIA

Inclusion/exclusion of Muslim OBCs in the process of modernization and development

*Syed Amin Jafri*

### **Introduction**

India's Twelfth Five-Year Plan (2012–17) document, dealing with the issue of social inclusion, points out that

Other Backward Classes (OBCs) comprise the castes and communities which are found common in the lists of the Mandal Commission Report and the Lists of the various State Governments in India. The National Sample Survey Office survey conducted during 2004–05 (61st Round) estimated that the OBC population constituted 41 per cent of the total population.

Referring to constitutional safeguards for OBCs, the document says,

The Constitution does not make any specific provisions for OBCs, but Article 15 of the Constitution empowers the States to make any special provision for the advancement of any socially and educationally backward classes of citizens or for the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes. Article 16 (4) also empowers the State to make provisions for reservations in appointments in favour of any backward class of citizens which, in the opinion of the State, is not adequately represented in the services under the State.

The Directive Principles of State Policy of the Constitution (Article 46) also state that “The State shall promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of the people and, in particular, of the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) and shall protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation.” Article 340 of the constitution also empowers the state to appoint a commission to study the conditions of socially and educationally backward classes.

## **494 Muslim castes/subcastes in central list**

As of December 2016, the state-wise central OBC list consisted of 2,603 castes and subcastes in the 30 states and union territories, including 494 castes/subcastes of the Muslim community. The proportion of Muslim castes/subcastes to the total stands at 18.98 percent.

Four States—Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland and the Union Territory of Lakshadweep—are not covered by the OBC reservation. There has been no caste-wise census since the 1931 census. Hence, the latest numbers of the population of the OBCs in the country are not available. However, the Mandal Commission had estimated the OBC population at 52 percent of the total population while the National Sample Survey Office based on its 61st round of the survey (2004–5), estimated it to be 41 percent as stated in its report on *Employment and Unemployment Situation among Social Groups in India*. Subsequently, the Registrar General of India announced that the caste census would be held as an independent exercise after the 2011 census was over. A Socio-Economic and Caste Census was conducted in 2011. However, while the data pertaining to the socio-economic status of the population was released in the public domain, the data of the Caste Census have been withheld by the Government of India.

### **Sub-quota for minorities**

The Government of India had set up the National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities (NCRLM) in March 2005 with Justice Ranganath Misra as chairman, to suggest criteria for identification of the socially and economically backward sections amongst religious and linguistic minorities and to recommend measures for their welfare, including reservation in government employment.

The Commission submitted its report to the government on May 10, 2007, wherein it had, inter alia, recommended the creation of a sub-quota for minorities from within the reservation of 27 percent available to OBCs, in government employment.

The government, after carefully considering the recommendation, decided to carve out a sub-quota of 4.5 percent for minorities, as defined under Section 2(c) of the National Commission for Minorities Act, 1992, from within the 27 percent reservation for OBCs as notified via the Department of Personnel and Training's O. M. No. 41018/2/2011-Estt. (Res.) dated December 22, 2011.

The O. M. said the caste/communities of the minorities which are included in the Central List of OBCs, notified state-wise from time to time by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, shall be covered by the said sub-quota. But this sub-quota was struck down by the Andhra Pradesh High Court vide its judgment on May 28, 2012. The special leave petition of the Government of India against the High Court order is pending in the Supreme Court.

### **Empowerment of minorities**

Coming to the issue of “Empowerment of Minorities,” the 12th Five-Year Plan document notes that “the Indian Constitution is committed to the ideas of equality and protection and assurance of rights of minorities.” The Minorities cover six religious communities, namely, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists, Zoroastrians (Parsis) and Jains (which was notified as a religious minority on January 27, 2014).

The population of these communities stood at 23.37 crore or 19.37 percent of the population, according to the 2011 census figures on the religious composition of the population. The largest minority community is that of Muslims (with 17.22 crore/14.23 percent of the country’s

population), followed by Christians (2.78 crore/2.30 percent), Sikhs (2.08 crore/1.72 percent), Buddhists (0.84 crore/0.70 percent), Jains (0.45 crore/0.37 percent) and Zoroastrians (only 57,264 /0.006 percent) (12th Five Year Plan (2012–17)).

### **Socio-economic conditions of Muslims**

The 12th Plan document says that the Muslims, which constitute the largest religious minority, lag behind others in economic, health and educational indices

. According to the latest Planning Commission estimates, the poverty ratio for Muslims is 33.9 per cent in urban areas .... In rural areas, the poverty ratio for Muslims is very high in States such as Assam, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal and Gujarat.

The literacy rate and work participation rate amongst the Muslims is low as compared to other minority communities. A majority of them are engaged in traditional and low paying professions, or are mostly small and marginal farmers, landless agricultural labourers, small traders, craftsmen and so on. Only a few of them are reported to have benefited from various developmental schemes.

The other Minority communities on the whole enjoy a comparatively better socio-economic status, although there are segments among the Christians and Buddhists, Mazhabi Sikhs and even sections of Zoroastrians/Parsis who are disadvantaged. An important concern *vis-a-vis* the Muslim community is the perception of discrimination and alienation, the 12th Plan document noted.

(*Ibid.*, 250)

The importance of educational empowerment assumes special importance in the context of minorities, especially Muslims, who have been lagging behind the rest. Reports of the Sachar Committee and Ranganath Misra Commission have dealt at length with the educational status of the minorities, particularly Muslims.

### ***Education***

The literacy rate among Muslims is significantly lower than among other communities although it is higher than that of the SCs and the STs. The high rate of admission at primary levels shows the intense desire of the minorities to seek modern education. Lower percentages at higher levels show that the community starts lagging behind from the secondary level onwards. A comparison with other religious communities in higher education shows the huge gap between the representation of Muslims in higher education and that of other communities. Regarding the student drop-out rates, those of Muslim students tend to peak at the senior secondary levels.

### ***Work Participation Rate***

TThe Work Participation Rate (WPR) for all religious communities was 39.1 percent in the census of 2001. While Sikhs with 53.3 percent WPR had the highest WPR (but a lowly 20.2 percent WPR for women), Buddhists had 40.6 percent (31.7 percent for women), Christians 39.7 percent (28.7 percent for women). Muslims stood at the bottom with 31.3 percent. The WPR for Muslim women too was the lowest, at 14.1 percent.

While the gender gap at the national level in terms of WPR for women is 26.1 percent, the gender gap among Muslims (33.4 percent) and Sikhs (33.1 percent) is higher.

### ***Employment***

Almost 49.1 percent of Muslims, 52.8 percent of Christians and 47.3 percent of Sikhs are employed as “other workers.” This category includes workers in service, manufacturing, trade and commerce and allied activities. The National Sample Survey Office, in their 61st Round of survey, found that more than half of the workers in the rural areas were self-employed, the proportion being the highest among the Muslim workers, both male (60 percent) and female (75 percent).

The participation of Muslims in salaried jobs is low at 13 percent. In urban areas, less than 8 percent is employed in the formal sector against a national average of 21 percent. More than 12 percent of Muslim male workers is engaged in street vending as compared to the national average of less than 8 percent.

Muslim workers are also found to be in a majority in the industrial sectors of tobacco (41 percent), wearing apparel (30 percent) and textiles (21 percent). The figures indicate that Muslim workers are largely concentrated in the informal sector, which is characterized by low wages, poor working conditions and little or no social security.

### **Sachar Committee and Ranganath Misra Commissions**

The Government of India constituted the High-Level Committee to examine the Social, Economic and Educational Status of the Muslim Community in India (headed by Justice Rajinder Sachar, hence Sachar Committee) and the National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities (Justice Ranganath Misra Commission) for identifying the criteria for socially and economically backward classes among the religious and linguistic minorities, and to suggest various welfare measures for Minorities, including reservation. While the Sachar Committee submitted its report in 2006, the Ranganath Commission submitted its report in 2007. While the Sachar Committee Report is under implementation, the government acted on one of the recommendations of Justice Ranganath Misra’s Commission Report, for providing for a sub-quota for minorities out of the 27 percent reservation for the OBCs.

### **Profile of Muslim OBCs**

It has been established by both the Sachar Committee and the Ranganath Misra Commission reports that Muslims in India are the most backward community despite their rich cultural heritage and strong numerical presence. In fact, the Sachar Committee devotes an entire chapter (No. 10) to the Muslim OBCs and affirmative action.

The First Backward Classes Commission (Kaka Kalelkar Commission) in its report in 1955, emphasized the lower status in the caste hierarchy as the determining factor for backwardness along with other considerations such as educational levels, income levels and representation in public employment. The Commission’s report was the first instance in which certain castes/communities among Muslims (and other religious minorities) were also declared backward and brought within the purview of affirmative action.

The Second Backward Classes Commission (B. P. Mandal Commission, 1980) also relied on the caste criterion; however, the tangible indicators to ascertain a caste or any social group as “backward” included lower position in the caste hierarchy, lower age at marriage within the

group, higher female work participation, higher school drop-out rate, inaccessibility to drinking water, lower average value of family assets, higher occurrence of *kutcha* houses that are built with mud and straw and are low-cost constructions and not durable.

Sociological studies on the social structure of Muslims in India have emphasized the presence of descent-based social stratification among them. Features of the Hindu caste system such as hierarchical ordering of social groups, endogamy and hereditary occupation have been found to be amply present among the Indian Muslims as well. The Census of India 1901 listed 133 social groups wholly or partially Muslim.

### Four major social groups among Muslims

The present-day Muslim society in India is divided into two broad categories, namely, "Ashraf" and "Ajlaf." The former, meaning noble, includes all Muslims of foreign blood and converts from higher castes. "Ajlaf" means degraded or unholly, those who practice the ritually unclean occupations and low-caste converts to Islam. The two categories comprise four major social groups among the Muslims: (i) the *Ashraf* who trace their origins to foreign lands such as Arabian peninsula, Iran, Turkey and Afghanistan and (ii) the upper caste Hindus who converted to Islam; the *Ajlaf* comprise (iii) the middle caste converts whose occupations are ritually clean, and (iv) the converts from the erstwhile untouchable castes, Bhangi (scavenger), Mehtar (sweeper), Chamar (tanner), Dom and so on. The last category is also called *Arzal*.

In Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal, Sayyads, Sheikhs, Moghuls and Pathans constitute the *Ashraf* while the *Ajlaf* are carpenters, artisans, painters, graziers, tanners, milkmen, etc. According to the census of 1901, the *Ajlaf* category includes the various classes of converts who are known as Nao Muslim in Bihar and Nasya in north Bengal. It also includes various functional groups such as that of the Jolaha (weaver), Dhunia (cotton-carder), Kulu (oil presser), Kunjra (vegetable seller), Hajjam (barber), Darzi (tailor), and the like. The third category recorded in the census was *Arzal* consisting of the lowest castes such as Halalkhor, Lalbegi, Abdal, and Bediya and so on.

In Andhra Pradesh, a field study conducted in 1987 found hierarchically arranged endogamous groups among Muslims. At the top of the ladder were those claiming foreign descent—Syed, Shaikh, Pathan and Labbai (descendants of Arab traders who took native wives). At the lowest level were groups with "unclean" occupations such as Dudekula (cotton cleaners), Hajjam (barbers) and Fakir-Budbudki (mendicants) (Government of India 2006).

Muslim groups currently bracketed under the category "OBC" come essentially from the *Ajlaf* category of the Muslim population. They are the converts from the middle and lower caste Hindus and are identified with their traditional occupations. A study of a village in Uttar Pradesh identified 19 such groups including Julahas (weavers), Mirasis (singers), Darzis (tailors), Halwais (sweet makers), Manihars (bangle makers) and so on (Prime Minister's High Level Committee—Sachar Committee 2006, 193).

The 1911 census listed some 102 caste groups among Muslims in UP and at least 97 of them came from the *Ajlaf* category. Many groups such as Rajputs, Kayasthas, Koeris, Koris, Kumhars, Kurmis, Malis and Mochis are found among both Hindu and Muslim people.

Since the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order 1950, popularly known as the Presidential Order (1950), restricts the SC status only to Hindu groups having "unclean" occupations, their non-Hindu equivalents have been bracketed with the middle caste converts and declared OBCs. The OBCs among Muslims, thus, constitute two broad categories: One, converts to Islam from the "unclean" groups among Hindus or the *Arzal*, namely, the Halalkhor, Hela, Lalbegi or Bhangi (scavengers), Dhobi (washermen), Nai or Hajjam (barbers), Chik (butchers), Fakir (beg-

gars); two, converts to Islam from the “clean” occupational castes such as the Momin or Julaha (weavers), Darzi or Idiris (tailors), Rayeen or Kunjara (vegetable sellers).

Thus, one can discern three groups among Muslims: (1) those without any social disabilities, the *Ashraf*; (2) those equivalent to Hindu OBCs, the *Ajlaf*, and (3) those equivalent to Hindu SCs, the *Arzal*. Those who are referred to as Muslim OBCs combine categories (2) and (3).

### **Approaches to affirmative action for Muslim OBCs**

At the all-India level, the issue of OBCs has been attempted to be addressed by instituting two Backward Classes Commissions with the mandate to evolve the criteria of backwardness, identify social groups on that basis and suggest measures to ameliorate their condition. Of the two, the report of the first Commission (Kaka Kalelkar Commission) was rejected by the central government for having used “caste” and not the economic criterion for identifying backward classes.

The report of the second Commission (Mandal Commission) was partially implemented in 1990 more than a decade after it was submitted. Besides these two attempts at the center, various state governments instituted their own backward classes commissions and have evolved distinct approaches to reservation of backward classes. They discussed the largest minority, the Muslims, in great detail. These two Commissions and their findings are discussed in the following pages.

#### **Kaka Kalelkar Commission (1955)**

The First Backward Classes Commission headed by Kaka Kalelkar submitted its report in 1955. The report presented a list of 2,399 castes and communities considered backward, with 837 of them considered as the “most backward” and hence, requiring special attention. Thus, the category, Backward Classes, was further bifurcated into two categories, the Backward and the Most Backward.

The list included not only backward groups from amongst the Hindus, but also non-Hindus, including Muslims. The Commission’s report was the first instance wherein the presence of “backward communities” among Muslims (and other religious minorities) received recognition in official parlance.

The caste basis did not find approval from the chairperson of the Commission and one of the reasons cited was the assumed castelessness of Muslims and Christians: “My eyes were however open to the dangers of suggesting remedies on the caste basis when I discovered that it is going to have a most unhealthy effect on the Muslim and Christian sections of the nation,” said Kaka Kalelkar.

#### **Mandal Commission (1980)**

The second All-India Backward Classes Commission (or the Mandal Commission as it is popularly known), submitted its report in 1980. The Commission evolved 11 indicators, a mix of caste and class features, for assessing social and educational backwardness. The Commission saw castes as the “building bricks of Hindu social structure” that, despite the constitutional commitment to establish a casteless and egalitarian society, had continued to persist. It arrived at an exhaustive list of 3,743 castes that were declared as backward.

The Commission, in principle, accepted that occurrence of caste was not restricted to Hindu society and that its influence was also found among non-Hindu groups of Muslims, Sikhs and Christians as well. Based on the data provided by the 1931 census and field survey conducted

at the instance of the Commission, at least 82 different social groups among Muslims were declared OBCs. The Commission, however, desisted from employing “caste” as a criterion to identify non-Hindu OBCs as “these religions are (were) totally egalitarian in their outlook.” The Commission also refrained from invoking “poverty” as the sole criterion.

The criteria that the Commission evolved to qualify as OBCs were: (a) All Hindu “untouchable” people converted to another religion and (b) such occupational communities which are known by the name of their traditional hereditary occupation and whose Hindu counterparts have been included in the list of Hindu OBCs. Among Muslims, the first category is the *Arzal* and the second category the *Ajlaf*.

By clubbing the *Arzal* and the *Ajlaf* Muslim people in an all-encompassing OBC category, the Mandal Commission overlooked the disparity in the nature of deprivations that they faced. Being at the bottom of the social hierarchy, the *Arzal* people are the worst off and thus needed to be handled separately. It would have been appropriate if they were absorbed in the SC list, or at least categorized in a separate group as was done with the Most Backward Classes (MBC) carved out of the OBCs.

### **Muslim OBCs not included in the state and central list of OBCs**

Reservations for OBCs have a longer history in the states than at the center. As the recommendations of the Mandal Commission came to be accepted, the central list of OBCs, in the initial phase, was prepared by employing the principle of “commonality.”

Thus, only those castes/communities listed both in the state list and also in the list prepared by the Mandal Commission were included in the central list. It is not surprising, therefore, that a number of castes/communities that had either been listed only in the Mandal list or only in the state list were left out. This discrepancy was expected to be solved once a permanent body, namely, the National Commission for Backward Classes (NCBC) was formed.

The NCBC, formed in 1993, had issued a set of guidelines based on social, economic and educational indicators, for castes/communities to be included in the central list of OBCs. The discrepancy between the two lists, central and state, is still evident. This is a general complaint and not confined to Muslims alone. There are many OBC groups, irrespective of their religion, that are present in the state list but missing in the central list. Madhya Pradesh, for instance, has 91 social groups listed as OBCs in the list recommended by the State Backward Classes Commission, but only 67 such groups have found entry in the central list. Uttar Pradesh has 79 castes in the state OBC list, but only 77 in the central list, in Rajasthan there are 74 castes in the state list but only 68 have been accorded OBC status in the central list (National Commission for Backward Classes 1993, 200).

Such a discrepancy also applies in the case of Muslim OBCs. In Madhya Pradesh, for example, there are 37 communities listed in the state list as Islamic groups, however, only 27 of them are found in the central list. In Bihar, after the recent revision of the list, there are 17 OBC groups that have not found a place in the central list. Six of them are exclusively Muslim, namely, (i) Faqir/Diwan, (ii) Julaha/Ansari (the synonym Momin is in the central list), (iii) Itrfarosh/Gadheri/Itpaj/Ibrahim, (iv) Jat, (v) Gadaria and (vi) Surajpuri.

In Uttar Pradesh, two Muslim groups—Mirshikar and Nanbai—have not found entry in the central list. In Gujarat, Muslim groups such as Jilaya, Tariya-tai, Mansuri, Arab, Sumra, Tarak, Kalal and Bahvaiya are listed in the state’s backward list but not in the central list. In Maharashtra, groups such as Mansooris, Pan Farosh, Ataar, Sanpagarudi, Muslim Madari, Muslim Gawli, Darwesi, Hashmi, Nalband among others, have not found entry in the central list (Ibid., 201).

The lists of OBCs prepared by the state governments have also missed many underprivileged castes and communities. There are a few groups among Muslims that have found place in the central list but are yet to be included in the state lists. Kalwars in Bihar, Mansooris in Rajasthan, Atishbazs in Uttar Pradesh, Rayeens, Kalwars, Rangwas and Churihars in West Bengal are examples of such Muslim groups (*Ibid.*, 201).

There is still a number of Muslim groups that have been included neither in the state list nor in the central list. These groups can be identified using the information collected by the Anthropological Survey of India under its People of India Project. In Gujarat, for instance, the People of India Project found 85 Muslim communities, of which at least 76 are non-*Ashraf*. In the central list, however, only 22 of them have found entry, whereas in the state list, there are only 27 Muslim groups. Thus, 54 non-*Ashraf* groups are missing in the central list and 59 in the state list (*Ibid.*, 201).

Similarly, in Bihar, according to the same Project, there are 37 castes/communities that are non-*Ashraf* but only 23 feature in the central list, that is 14 groups are missing. In Uttar Pradesh, the project lists 67 communities among Muslims, 61 of which are occupational groups. Both the state and the central lists of OBCs contain only 32 of them, which means that 29 groups have gone missing (*Ibid.*, 201).

### **Muslim OBCs are most backward**

As per the 61st round of the National Sample Survey Office survey, Muslim OBCs constitute 40.7 percent of the total Muslim population. They are also a sizable component (15.7 percent) of the total OBC population of the country (*Ibid.*, 203). It is important to underline that Muslims in India are not a monolith. While Hindu OBCs continue to be relatively deprived in terms of the all-India data, the Muslim community as a whole is lagging behind Hindu OBCs. However, overall, the conditions of Muslim OBCs are worse than those of Muslims in general. The abysmally low representation of Muslim OBCs suggests that the benefits of entitlements meant for the backward classes are yet to reach them.

To explore the differentials across the socio-religious communities further, an exploratory exercise was undertaken by the Sachar Committee to assess if the proportions of Muslim OBCs, Muslims in general and Hindu OBCs differ significantly in high- and low-income groups. It is noteworthy that, as compared to other socio-religious communities (SRCs) (except SCs/STs), the share of Muslim OBCs and the general Muslim population is significantly higher in low-income groups.

Within the Muslim community, a larger percentage of Muslim OBCs fall in the low-income category as compared to Muslims in general. In contrast, a much smaller share of Muslims belongs to the high-income category. Interestingly, the percentage of SCs/STs in the high-income group is higher than that of Muslims. Among Muslims, Muslim OBCs are slightly lagging behind the Muslims in general in the high-income group.

The Sachar Committee observed,

Based on the arguments and data presented here, it is logical to suggest that Muslims in India, in terms of their social structure, consist of three groups, *Ashraf*, *Ajlaf* and *Arzal*. The three groups require different types of affirmative action. The second group, *Ajlaf*/OBCs, need additional attention which could be similar to that of Hindu-OBCs. The third group, those with similar traditional occupation as that of the SCs, may be designated as Most Backward Classes (MBCs) as they need multifarious measures, including reservation, as they are “cumulatively oppressed.

(*Ibid.*, 213–14)

## **Findings of Sachar Committee *vis-à-vis* Muslim OBCs and affirmative action**

Kerala and Karnataka stand out for having extended the benefits of reservation to their entire Muslim population. In Karnataka, the Havanur Commission (1972) recommended the creation of a distinct category of minority group with reservation not exceeding 6 percent. In Kerala, a separate Muslim share was fixed at 10 percent and later increased to 12 percent. The Tamil Nadu government has done away with reservation on ground of religion but has incorporated nearly 95 percent of the Muslims in the backward classes. Most of the variables indicate that Muslim OBCs are significantly more deprived in comparison to Hindu OBCs. The highest proportion of Muslims declared as STs is found in Lakshadweep where Muslims constitute the entire ST population (99.74 percent) (Prime Minister's High Level Committee—Sachar Committee 2006, 196–7).

About half of the Muslim children aged 6–12 years are not currently attending school. The work participation rate among the 15–64 years population shows the presence of a sharp difference between Hindu OBCs (67 percent) and Muslim SRCs (about 55 percent).

Muslim OBCs are lagging behind general Muslim and Hindu OBC categories in terms of participation in the formal sector and jobs that provide regularity of employment (both waged and salaried) (*Ibid.*, 208).

Within the formal sector, the share of Muslim OBCs in government/public sector undertaking (PSU) jobs was much lower than those of Hindu OBCs and Muslims in general. A majority of women in all SRCs work in their own dwelling. However, the proportion of such workers among Muslims, especially Muslim OBCs, is higher.

The Sachar Committee's estimates indicate that while out of every 100 workers about 11 are Hindu OBCs, only three are Muslim (general) and one is a Muslim OBC. Muslim OBCs have better share at the Group A level, the highest level in government employment, but their presence is insignificant at all other levels (*Ibid.*, 209, 211).

Monthly Per Capita Expenditure of Muslims (both categories) is much lower than the national average. Overall, the inequality levels are somewhat higher among Muslim OBCs as compared to other SRCs. The abysmally low representation of Muslim OBCs at all variables suggests that the benefits of entitlements meant for the backward classes are yet to reach them. The conditions of Muslims in general are also lower than the Hindu OBCs who have the benefit of reservations.

The Sachar Committee made some specific recommendations regarding reservation. It observed that by combining the *Arzal* and the *Ajlaf* among Muslims in an all-encompassing OBC category the Mandal Commission overlooked the disparity in the nature of deprivations that they faced. Being at the bottom of the social hierarchy, the *Arzal* are the worst off and need to be handled separately. The Sachar Committee mentioned that it would be most appropriate if they were absorbed in the SC list, or at least in a separate category such as MBCs carved out of the OBCs. Thus, the Sachar Committee also had recommended for affirmative action for Muslims in India through separate reservation. For several years, members of OBCs belonging to religious minorities have been demanding that a separate quota should be earmarked for them out of the 27 percent reserved for OBCs.

The Sachar Committee conclusively established that the Muslim community in India is one of the most backward communities in the country and thus deserves special attention. The Ranganath Misra Commission too made a similar recommendation in its report that within the reservation of 27 percent for OBCs, a separate quota should be earmarked for religious minorities.

## **Socio-economic status of religious minorities**

Education is the key to development. It is the most important requirement for improving the socio-economic status of any people. The literacy and educational levels among religious

minorities vary considerably from one community to the other and from one geographical area to another. While educational level of Jains, Christians, Parsis and Sikhs is higher, that of Muslims and Buddhists is low and is next to SCs/STs. Census statistics reveal that the educational status of Muslims is relatively low. However, disaggregated data presents a picture of unevenness in the educational status of Muslims and Buddhists cutting across the states.

The states of Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh, which account for almost 65 percent of the total population of Muslims in the country, present a dismal picture in terms of social indicators of development for the Muslims and the general population also.

In terms of educational, social and economic status, in the underdeveloped or backward states, the poor and socially and economically backward of each community, including the Muslims, are equal victims and suffer equally from disabilities or deprivation. The enrolment of children of religious minorities at the primary level is better than that of SCs/STs. However, the dropout rate of Muslims is higher at the middle and secondary levels.

The economic status of religious minorities varies from group to group and area to area. In the case of religious minorities, the work participation rate (WPR) of Buddhists, Hindus and Christians is approximately the same as for all religious populations which is 39.1 percent. The WPR of Sikhs is slightly less than the national average. However, in the case of both Jains and Muslims it is low, though perhaps for different reasons. Muslims are the lowest at 31.3 percent.

In terms of categories of workers, more Hindus, Sikhs and Christians are cultivators than Muslims. However, Muslims have the highest percentage of workers in the household industry sector. Christians and Sikhs are lowest in terms of agriculture workers.

In terms of “other occupations,” the number of Christians is proportionately the largest in this category at 52.8 percent. The number of Muslims in this category stands at 49.1 percent, Hindus are the lowest at 35.5 percent.

The level of poverty determines the economic status of individuals. While the percentage of people living below the poverty line among Muslims approximates to that of Hindus in the rural areas, the percentage of Muslims living below the poverty line in the urban areas is high. The largest number of people in the rural areas who live below the poverty line belong to the category of other religions.

The religious minorities are more urban-based than rural-based. While more Christians are engaged in wage employment, more Muslims are employed in household industries and are, by and large, self-employed. Despite these variations, it is apparent that the population of religious minorities is as dispersed as that of the majority community.

### **Recommendations relating to religious minorities**

The Ranganath Misra Commission's recommendations are not only for the communities notified as “minorities” by executive action under the National Commission for Minorities Act 1992 but for all religious minorities—large or small—including the Hindu minority in the union territories of Lakshadweep, Kashmir, Ladakh and states of Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Punjab.

In the matter of criteria for identifying backward classes, there should be absolutely no discrimination whatsoever between the majority community and the minorities; and, therefore, the criteria now applied for this purpose to the majority community—whatever those criteria may be—must be unreservedly applied also to all the minorities.

As a natural corollary to the aforesaid recommendation, all those classes, sections and groups among the minorities should be treated as backward whose counterparts in the majority community are regarded as backward under the present scheme of things. All those classes, sections

and groups among the various minorities as are generally regarded as “inferior” within the social strata and societal system of those communities, should be treated as backward. To be more specific, all those social and vocational groups among the minorities who but for their religious identity would have been covered by the present net of SCs should be unquestionably treated as socially backward, irrespective of whether the religion of those other communities recognizes the caste system or not.

Those groups among the minorities whose counterparts in the majority community are at present covered by the reservation net of STs should also be included in that net; and also, more specifically, members of the minority communities living in any tribal area from pre-independence days should be so included irrespective of their ethnic characteristics.

As democracy is a game of numbers, the numerically weaker sections of the citizenry in any society may and often do get marginalized by the majority. This is eminently true of the religious minorities in India where the society remains intensively religious and religion-conscious and the religious minorities live with a numerically predominant religious community accounting for over 80 percent of the national population. In such a situation, legal protection from the hegemony and preponderance of the majority community becomes a pressing need of the religious minorities as a whole, and not just that of the “backward” sections among them.

Since the minority intake in minority educational institutions has, in the interest of national integration, been restricted to about 50 percent, thus virtually earmarking the remaining 50 percent or so for the majority community, the same analogy can be applied for the same purpose: at least 15 percent of seats in all non-minority educational institutions should be earmarked by law for the minorities as follows: 10 percent for Muslims (since they constitute 73 percent of the total minorities population) and 5 percent for the other minorities.

Minor adjustments inter se can be made in the 15 percent of earmarked seats. In the case of non-availability of Muslim candidates to fill 10 percent of earmarked seats, the remaining vacancies may be given to the other minorities if their members are available over and above their share of 5 percent; but in no case shall any seat within the recommended 15 percent go to the majority community.

As is the case with the SCs and STs at present, those minority community candidates who can compete with others and secure admission on their own merit shall not be included in these 15 percent earmarked seats. As regards the backward sections among all the minorities, the concessions now available in terms of lower eligibility criteria for admission and a lower rate of fee, now available to the SCs and STs, should be extended also to such sections among the minorities.

The same pattern of reservation should be followed in all government schemes like Rural Employment Generation Program, Prime Minister’s Rozgar Yojana, Grameen Rozgar Yojana, and so on.

Since the minorities—especially the Muslims—are very much under-represented, and sometimes wholly unrepresented, in government employment, they should be regarded as backward in respect of representation and 15 percent of posts in all cadres and grades under the central and state governments should be earmarked for them as spelled out above. As the Ranganath Misra Commission report clarified,

The action recommended as above will have full sanction of Article 16 (4) of the Constitution. Yet, should there be some insurmountable difficulty in implementing this recommendation, as an alternative since according to the Mandal Commission Report, the Minorities constitute 8.4 per cent of the total OBC population, in the 27 per cent OBC quota, an 8.4 per cent sub-quota should be earmarked for the

Minorities with an internal break-up of 6 per cent for the Muslims (commensurate with their 73 per cent share in the total Minority population at the national level) and 2.4 per cent for the other Minorities – with minor adjustments inter se in accordance with population of various Minorities in various States and Union Territories.

*(Ranganath Misra Commission 2004)*

The reservation now extended to the STs, which is a religion-neutral class, should be carefully examined to assess the extent of minority presence in it and remedial measures should be initiated to correct the imbalance, if any. The situation in Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Lakshadweep which are minority-dominated and predominantly tribal, as also such tribal areas/districts in Assam and all other states, is to be especially taken into account in this respect.

The caste system should be recognized as a general social characteristic of the Indian society as a whole, without questioning whether the philosophy and teachings of any particular religion recognize it or not. This fact is duly recognized that among the Muslims of India the concepts of *Zat* (caste) and *Arzal* (lower castes) are very much in practice; and even the Muslim law of marriage recognizes the doctrine of Kufr—parity in marriage between the parties in all vital respects including social status and descent.

The Ranganath Misra Commission Report recommended that Paragraph 3 of the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order 1950—which originally restricted the SCs net only to the Hindus and later included Sikhs and Buddhists, thus still excluding from its purview Muslims, Christians, Jains and Parsis—should be wholly deleted by appropriate action so as to completely delink the SC status from religion and make the SCs net fully religion-neutral like that of the STs. The commission observed:

All those groups and classes among the Muslims and Christians whose counterparts among the Hindus, Sikhs or Buddhists, are included in the Central or State Scheduled Castes lists should also be covered by the Scheduled Caste net. If any such group or class among the Muslims and Christians is now included in an OBC list, it should be deleted from there while transferring it to the Scheduled Castes – placing the same persons in the Scheduled Caste list if they are Hindu, Sikh or Buddhist but in the OBC list if they follow any other religion – which is the case in many States – in our opinion clearly amounts to religion-based discrimination.

*(Ranganath Misra Commission 2004, 154)*

### **Supreme Court observations in Indra Sawhney case**

The Supreme Court in its judgment in the *Indra Sawhney and others vs Union of India and others* had said:

We are of the opinion that there is no constitutional or legal bar to a State categorizing backward classes as “backward” and “more backward.” We are not saying that it ought to be done. We are concerned with the question if a State makes such a categorization, whether it would be invalid? We think not.

Thus, it is clear the government is within its legitimate rights to make sub-categorization amongst OBCs which would lead to more equitable distribution of benefits of reservation

amongst the different castes and communities. While 30 states/union territories have their own list of OBCs, 12 states/UTs have subcategories of castes/communities in the state list of OBCs. They include Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Maharashtra, Bihar, West Bengal, Sikkim, Jammu and Kashmir.

### **Sub-quota for minorities from the quota of OBCs**

The Government of India announced a 4.5 percent sub-quota for minorities from within the 27 percent reservation for OBCs on December 22, 2011. Announcing the Minority Sub-Quota in the Parliament, the then Minister of Minority Affairs Salman Khursheed made a statement in the House:

Based on the Report of the Second Backward Classes Commission, popularly known as Mandal Commission, the Government of India had made a notification on 13th August 1990 reserving 27 per cent of the vacancies in civil posts and services under the Government of India for Other Backward Classes. Although the Backward sections of Minority population were included in the Central List of OBC, there has been a growing demand over the last two decades that a separate quota need to be provided for the Minorities given the fact that major sections of the Minorities are Most Backward in the country. In order to assess the status of Minority communities, the Government of India had notified on 29th October 2004 to constitute a National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities (NCRLM) and the same was constituted on 15th March 2005 under the Chairmanship of Justice Ranganath Misra.

The Commission submitted its report to the Government on 10th May 2007 which was placed in both Houses of Parliament on 18th December 2009.

The last Caste Census in India was held in 1931. The Mandal Commission has extrapolated the figures of 1931 Caste Census over four decades to state that the OBC population is approximately 52 per cent of which 43.60 per cent are Hindu OBC and 8.40 per cent are non-Hindu. The proportion between the two is currently approximately 1:5 because of the decadal growth of Muslims has been higher compared to Hindus. Therefore, the Government has fixed the sub-quota at 4.5 per cent. (8.40: 43.60 = 1:5.2)

It may be clarified here that only backward sections of the Minority Communities can avail of 4.5 per cent sub-quota. Therefore, inclusion or exclusion in the Central OBC list will be strictly on the basis of backwardness of Minorities which include Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, Buddhists and Zoroastrians (Parsis) as has been provided under Section 2(c) of the National Commission for Minorities (NCM) Act, 1992.

The reservation will be applicable, with effect from 1st January 2012 to Central Government jobs and services as per the Ministry of Personnel, Public Grievances & Pensions (DoPT) O. M. No. 41018/2/2011-Estt.(Res) dated 22nd December, 2011 and also to admissions to Central Government Educational Institutions as per the Notification of the Ministry of Human Resource Development (DHE) No. F1-1/2005-U.1A/846 dated 22nd December, 2011.

### **Andhra Pradesh High Court strikes down 4.5 percent sub-quota**

A batch of writ petitions was filed by R. Krishnaiah, President, Andhra Pradesh Backward Classes Welfare Association and others in the Andhra Pradesh High Court challenging the 4.5 percent sub-quota earmarked for minorities from within the 27 percent reservation for OBCs for admissions to central educational institutions and in appointments and posts under the Government of India. The principal contention of the petitioners was that the sub-quota reservation is religion-based and therefore it is in violation of Article 15(1) of the constitution with regard to reservation for admissions to educational institutions and of Article 16(2) of the constitution with regard to reservation for appointments and posts under the Government of India.

A Division Bench of the Andhra Pradesh (AP) High Court, consisting of the then Chief Justice Madan B. Lokur and Justice Sanjay Kumar, pronouncing the judgment in Public Interest Litigation Nos. 1, 22 and 56 of 2012, set aside the sub-quota of 4.5 percent in favor of backward classes belonging to minorities out of the 27 percent reservation for OBCs. In its judgment dated May 28, 2012, the Division Bench cited the following grounds for striking down the sub-quota:

- The National Commission for Backward Classes was not consulted, which was a procedural lapse.
- The sub-quota was carved out without revision of the list as it is obligatory on part of NCBC before any inclusion or exclusion.
- Provision of 4.5 per sub-quota in central government employment was based on NCRLM (Ranganath Misra Commission report) and not on NCBC recommendation. Hence, it was not valid as it was not intended for the socially and educationally backward. The NRCLM is not a statutory body, and its recommendations would not have any relevance to the NCBC Act. The mandate of this body was nowhere to fulfill the constitutional obligation and cannot be solely relied upon for the present purpose of providing sub-quota under Articles 15 and 16.
- There was no proof cited to substantiate the socio-educational backwardness of the minorities provided with reservation in employment and education. The central government took the issue casually, as the minorities are not a homogenous group and could not be treated as a class for the purpose of Articles 15 and 16.
- Carving out sub-quota from the existing quota meant identifying MBCs for which no empirical data was provided in the case at hand. Huge demographic changes that have taken place after the Mandal Commission have not been considered by the central government.
- The sub-quota can be earmarked on the basis of law and not through office memoranda.

### **Supreme Court refused stay on HC order quashing sub-quota**

On June 13, 2012, the Supreme Court refused to stay the AP High Court order quashing the central government's announcement of a 4.5 percent sub-quota for minorities on the basis of religion. "We are not inclined to grant stay," the Division Bench consisting of Justices K. S. Radhakrishnan and J. S. Khehar said while issuing notices to the petitioner on a Special Leave Petition (appeal) filed by the central government.

The Bench, before which the Ministry of Human Resource Development placed the relevant and supporting documents forming the basis for the sub-quota, asked, "Can you make classification on the basis of religion?" It further said that the December 22, 2011, office memoranda on the issue of sub-quotas did not have legislative support.

The Bench, which also questioned the calculation of providing 4.5 percent sub-quota within the 27 percent OBC quota, wanted to know from the government “whether there was any constitutional and statutory support for granting 4.5 percent sub-quota” and whether “the office memoranda has constitutional and statutory support or not?”

The Bench noted that there was ambiguity in the calculation for carving out sub-quotas within the OBC quota. It was of the view that carving out sub-quota for minorities would have a bearing on the OBCs. It also questioned the government for not consulting statutory bodies like the National Commission of Minorities and the National Commission for Backward Classes in determining the sub-quota. The appeal is still pending in the Supreme Court.

On February 18, 2014, the central government moved the Supreme Court for lifting of stay on implementation of the 4.5 percent sub-quota for minorities. The government cited the Supreme Court’s earlier order of March 25, 2010, permitting the AP government to implement similar reservation for backward Muslims within the state. The Solicitor General requested the bench consisting of Chief Justice P. Sathasivam and Justices Ranjan Gogoi and R. K. Agrawal for an urgent hearing on the pending petition to bring parity between the conflicting orders. The plea is yet to come up for hearing.

The central government could have avoided the legal wrangles over the 4.5 percent sub-quota for minorities if it had handled the issue in a proper manner. The central government should have consulted the NCBC and the NCM for determining the sub-quota. The total number of castes included in the state-wise OBC central list in 2011 was 2,423 and number of Muslim castes included in the same state-wise central list was 411. The proportion of Muslim castes to all the castes included in the list worked out to one-sixth. Hence, one-sixth of 27 percent OBC quota would work out to 4.5 percent. Instead of citing the Ranganath Misra Commission recommendations as the basis for arriving at 4.5 percent sub-quota the central government could have cited the formula of proportion of Muslim castes to the total number of the castes in the existing central list for quantifying the Muslim sub-quota out of the OBC quota of 27 percent. Alternatively, instead of terming the reservation as “Sub-quota for Minorities” the central government should have called it Sub-quota for Other Backward Class Muslim Groups because other than Muslims, no other specific minority caste groups are included in the OBC list.

### **Kundu Committee (post-Sachar evaluation committee) report**

On September 29, 2014, the Sachar Evaluation Committee submitted its report prepared in the context of the terms of reference indicated in Notification No 9-2/2013-PP - I of the Ministry of Minority Affairs dated August 5, 2013. The notification mandated the Committee to evaluate the process of implementation of the recommendations of the Prime Minister’s High Level Committee on “Social, Economic and Educational Status of the Muslim Community of India” (popularly known as the Sachar Committee) and the outcome of the programs being implemented by various ministries and to recommend corrective measures. Prof. Amitabh Kundu was appointed as the chairperson of this committee.

### **Summary and conclusions of Kundu Committee**

The Kundu Committee conclusions are summarized here:

1. The relative employment situation of the Muslims has remained unchanged.
2. The decline in the share of Muslims in rural–urban migration, as noted in the nineties, has continued, reflecting an exclusionary urbanization that has become less welcoming for weaker and vulnerable social groups.

3. Percentage increase in the share of urban population in the case of Muslims is low, especially in smaller urban centers, reflecting social factors and possibly discrimination constraining their mobility.
4. Wide differentials exist in the quality of employment wherein Muslims are found in a disadvantageous situation with reference to the type and sectors of employment.
5. The share of minorities in government employment remains low—less than half of the share of their total population in the country.
6. The lower percentage of Muslim households participating in public employment programs, compared to Hindu or Christian households suggests that such programs are unlikely to address the core problem of the Muslims, the most deprived minority in the labor market. More importantly, these would not improve the quality of employment, which is the major issue for the Muslims and not merely an increase in the work participation rate. Over the recent years, a large number of urban Muslim household have shifted to low productive self-employment.
7. Therefore, provision of decent employment is vital to shift them away from informal employment. Access to credit facilities at the micro level must be linked with the employment generation programs, particularly focused on the Muslim-concentrated districts.
8. The share of minorities in government employment remains low—less than half of the share of their total population in the country. This must be corrected by government-led planned and targeted recruitment drives.
9. Active outreach, recruitment and offers of scholarships, by both government and private educational institutions are essential to attract Muslims into higher education. This should be followed up with access to high quality professional and technical jobs to enable the Muslim youth to move to quality employment.
10. The government must incentivize both public and private sector companies to take up affirmative initiatives in skill training and internship programs that could improve the employment opportunities for Muslim youth.
11. As regards the high unemployment among the Muslim youth, especially among urban males and rural females, an environment needs to be developed along with formal support structures and social and employment networks that can assist unemployed Muslim youth to relocate from their home and take up jobs in manufacturing and modern service sectors.
12. The government and private sectors can create such support structures and a stipend system during the training period, through help centers and employment exchanges, both in large metros but in small towns and cities where the problem of Muslim livelihoods is most acute.

### **Kundu Committee on reservations and affirmative action**

1. The “Dalit” Muslims must be taken out of the OBC list and incorporated in the SC list based on the principle recommended by NCRLM that all caste groups whose counterparts among the Hindus, Sikhs or Buddhists have been included in the central/ state Scheduled Castes lists, should be included in these lists.
2. The same principle should be applied to the Muslim artisanal groups and included in the “most backward” subcategory within OBCs. The Ashraf Muslims may be accommodated in the OBC category or the most backward subcategory based on the necessary tests of social backwardness.
3. The benefits of affirmative action must be extended only to the most backward subcategory, identified rigorously. Given their levels of deprivation, the norms and procedures

prescribed for SC/ST students to avail government freeships, scholarships and the waiving of fees should be applied to the identified Muslims.

The Kundu Committee was appointed by the centrist coalition government of the United Progressive Alliance led by the Congress party. It submitted its report in 2014 after the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led coalition government took office. Given the ideological orientation of the BJP and its parent bodies in the Sangh Parivar, this is less inclined to act on the recommendations for affirmative action for the backward Muslims. Hence, the Kundu Committee report has been put in cold storage with no follow-up action since 2014.

### **Ten percent reservations for economically weaker sections**

In January 2019, the Government of India enacted the legislation providing for 10 percent reservations for the Economically Weaker Sections (EWS), over and above the reservations for the SCs, STs and OBCs. The overall quantum of reservations has increased to 59.5 per, including 15 percent for SCs, 7.5 percent for STs, 27 percent for OBCs and 10 percent for EWS. This has crossed the 50 percent ceiling laid down by the Supreme Court in the Indra Sawhney case. The law was enacted in keeping the “upper castes” in mind since these forces form the support base of the Sangh Parivar and their opposition to the Reservation policy favoring the OBCs is well known. They have contended that the reservation policy has been detrimental to their interests.

An NGO, “Youth for Equality,” challenged the act in the Supreme Court on the grounds that it breaches the ceiling of 50 percent reservations set by the Apex Court. The petitioners stated that they fully supported the reservations for the EWS but wanted these to be amalgamated with the OBC quota which stands at 27 percent, so that these do not breach the 50 percent cap. The Supreme Court, however, refused to stay the act stating that the matter required a detailed hearing. The issue is pending.

### **Muslim OBCs and affirmative action in the states**

#### ***Kerala and Karnataka models***

In terms of their policy of reservation for backward classes, Kerala and Karnataka stand out for having extended the benefits of reservation to their entire Muslim population. This has been achieved by including Muslims (minus the creamy layer) as a distinct group within the broad category of backward classes and then providing them with an exclusive quota. The policies date back to the pre-independence period when the two states were independent kingdoms.

In the erstwhile princely state of Mysore, affirmative action began as early as 1874 when a government decision reserved 80 percent of the positions in the police department for the non-Brahmins, Muslims and Indian Christians.

In Kerala, the demand for reservation for under-represented communities was accepted as early as 1936 in the princely states of Travancore and Cochin, and in Malabar, even earlier, in 1921. Quotas were fixed not only for caste groups such as the Ezhavas, but also for religious minorities—the Muslims and sections of Christians.

After independence, on the reorganization of the state of Mysore as Karnataka, all non-Brahmin Hindu castes and all non-Hindu minority communities like Muslims and Christians were declared as backward classes. In 1960, on the recommendations of the Nagana Gowda Committee, the category—Backward Classes—was bifurcated into Backwards (28 percent) and More Backwards (22 percent).

Together with the quota for SCs/STs, the magnitude of reservation rose to 68 percent. The Supreme Court in a landmark judgment, however, placed a 50 percent ceiling on the quantum of reservation. Muslims as a whole continued to be considered as among the backward communities.

The Havanur Commission (1972) recommended the creation of a distinct category of minority group with reservation not exceeding 6 percent. The state classified backward classes into three categories: (a) Most Backward; (b) More Backward and (c) Backward. All Muslims whose income is less than Rs2 lakh per annum were declared Backward and placed exclusively in one of the subcategories of “More Backward” with 4 percent of the seats set aside for them.

In Kerala, the reservation scheme, introduced in 1952, fixed the quantum of reservation at 45 percent (including 10 percent for SCs and STs). The beneficiaries included the Ezhavas, Kammalas, the Nadars (Hindu and Christian), other Hindu backward castes and SC and OBC converts to Christianity. On the reorganization of the state in 1956, the quota for backward classes was enhanced to 40 percent in Kerala. Later the scheme was modified to introduce sub-quotas for major backward groups. A separate Muslim share was fixed at 10 percent and that was later enhanced to 12 percent.

At present, the reservation system in Kerala is as follows: Backward Classes 40 percent (Ezhavas 14 percent; Muslims 12 percent; Latin Catholics 4 percent; Nadars 2 percent; Christian converts from SCs 1 per cent; Dheevaras 1 percent; OBCs 3 percent; and Viswakarmas 3 percent) and SCs and STs 10 percent.

### ***Tamil Nadu model***

Tamil Nadu offers a model of affirmative action for Muslims or Muslim OBCs that is slightly different from that offered by Kerala and Karnataka. Unlike Kerala and Karnataka, Muslims as a distinct category are not eligible for reservation, yet most of the Muslim *biradaris* or groups or castes are included either in the Backward or in the Most Backward list. The state government has done away with reservation on ground of religion, yet nearly 95 percent of the Muslims has been included within the Backward Classes category.

To begin with, the Muslims who were educationally backward were given special treatment vide a resolution dated July 29, 1872, during colonial rule. Later it was extended to the “aborigines” and low caste Hindus. As the Brahmins were grossly over-represented in high salaried jobs, a Government Order (1927) introduced compartmental reservation whereby the non-Brahmins were to have 42 percent of the posts available and Muslims 17 percent.

Post-independence, reservation was extended to only constitutionally recognized deprived categories, such as the SCs, the STs and the Backward Classes. A separate quota for Muslims was also withdrawn; rather, various communities among Muslims considered backward were included in the list of Backward Classes.

The Sattanathan Commission (1970) endorsed the 1951 categorization, it identified 105 castes/communities as backward and recommended 31 percent reservation, whereas 18 percent was left for the SCs and STs. Tamil-speaking Muslim groups, such as Labbais, Deccani Muslims and others were included in the backward list. In 1980, the 31 percent quota for Backward Classes was raised to 50 percent taking the total to 68 percent.

Following the recommendations of the Ambasankar Commission (1982), the Backward Classes were split into Backward Castes (BCs), Most Backward Classes (MBCs) and De-notified Communities. The quantum of reservation currently is 69 percent; far beyond the Supreme Court limit of 50 percent. The Tamil Nadu Backward Classes, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Reservation of Seats in Educational Institution and of Appointments or Posts in the

Services under the State) Act, 1993 was included in the 9th Schedule through the 76th amendment of the constitution.

### ***Bihar model***

The “Karpouri formula,” as it is popularly called, allows for the bifurcation of the category—Backward Classes—into its advanced section, namely, the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and relatively more deprived, namely, the Most Backward Classes (MBCs).

The first major effort to understand the plight of backward classes in Bihar was undertaken when the Mungeri Lal Commission was constituted in 1971. In its report submitted in 1975, the Commission recommended the bifurcation of the Backward Classes into OBCs and MBCs. The OBC list contained 128 castes and the MBC list had 93 caste groups.

The Karpouri Thakur government in 1978 accepted the classification made by the Mungeri Lal Commission. For the purposes of recruitments to jobs, 8 percent was set aside for the OBCs, 12 percent for the MBCs, 14 percent for the SCs, 10 percent for the STs, 3 percent for women and another 3 percent for the Economically Backward.

After the carving out of Jharkhand from Bihar, the above scheme was slightly amended. The ST quota was reduced to 1 percent; the SC quota was now fixed at 15 percent, with 13 percent for OBCs, 18 percent for the MBCs and 3 percent for backward caste women. Muslim caste groups, depending on their level of backwardness, have been included either in the OBC or in the MBC list. While nine Muslim groups are in the state’s OBC list, 27 of them form part of the MBC list.

The three different models for affirmative action for Muslims/Muslim backwards can be summarized as:

- a. Reservation of seats for the entire Muslim community (excluding the creamy layer): Kerala and Karnataka.
- b. Reservation on the basis of backward caste/biradari but most of the Muslim groups included covering 95 percent of Muslim population:Tamil Nadu.
- c. Bifurcation of OBCs into Backwards and Most Backwards (MBCs), most of the Muslim backwards in the MBC list: Bihar.

### ***OBc reservations in Maharashtra***

According to the 2011 census, the composition of socio-religious categories (SRCs) in the state population is as follows: 11.8 percent of SCs, 9.4 percent of STs, and 11.5 percent of Muslim minorities. Besides, estimation based on the National Sample Survey Office 68th round (2011–12) Consumer Expenditure Survey, shows that the OBCs account for about 34.1 percent in the state population. Together, the SCs, STs and OBCs account for about 55.3 percent of the state population. Given this backdrop of the population of SC/STs and OBCs, the state government is currently implementing the reservations for various communities in public employment and education.

In respect of providing reservations to backward classes, the Maharashtra state government subclassified backward classes into various groups and earmarked a total 32 percent of reservations for all these backward classes. The reservations provided for backward classes according to their sub-categorization are as follows: Special backward classes (SBCs): 2 percent; OBCs: 19 percent; Vimukthi Jathis or De-notified Tribes (VJs/DNTs): 3 percent; Nomadic Tribes and Semi-Nomadic Tribes (NTs) are provided with a total of 8 percent of reservation after catego-

rizing them into three groups (category B 2.5 percent, C 3.5 percent and D 2 percent). When combined with the 13 percent of reservation for SCs and 7 percent for STs, a total of 52 percent reservation is implemented in Maharashtra.

Although the present scheme of reservations provided in the state had taken concrete shape during the 1960s, the reservation policy and the scheme evolved over a period of time. As in many southern states, the history of reservations in Maharashtra starts in the colonial period.

The reservations started in the erstwhile princely state of Kolhapur. In 1902, Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj of Kolhapur provided reservations in government employment for backward classes. As per the constitution, reservations for SCs/STs were provided in the state since 1950 in accordance with their share in the state population. The reservations for backward classes were provided since the middle of the 1960s and continue today.

### ***Demand for reservations for Marathas and Muslims***

There were long-standing demands of Marathas and Muslims on providing reservations to their communities. The issue of providing reservations to the Muslim community was first considered in 2004 by the state government. Although it had not materialized at the time, it was constantly pursued by the state government which constituted a Study Group in 2008 headed by Dr Mahmoodur Rahman, IAS (Retd), to examine the socio-economic situation of Muslims in the state. The Committee in its report submitted on October 21, 2012, recommended that the state government provide 8 to 10 percent of reservations to Muslims in state government jobs.

### **Reservations for BCs in Andhra Pradesh**

The successive governments have issued executive orders or enacted laws to provide special concessions/reservations to weaker sections and religious and linguistic minorities in the erstwhile undivided Andhra Pradesh. More often than not, these measures of the government were challenged in the courts as violative of Articles 14, 15 and 16 of the constitution.

The first AP Backward Classes Commission was constituted in 1968 initially under the chairmanship of former state Chief Justice Manohar Pershad and later with retired Chief Secretary K. N. Anantharaman to prepare a fresh list of socially and educationally backward classes in the state and apportion the quotas to them.

After an exhaustive survey of the vocations and occupations carried on by the backward classes and allied matters regarding social backwardness, the Commission indicated that only such persons belonging to a caste or community which have traditionally followed unclean, undignified or inferior occupations can be grouped under the classification of BCs. Regarding educational backwardness, the Commission applied the principle that communities, whose student population is well below the state average, have to be considered educationally backward.

The Commission submitted its report on June 20, 1970. On the recommendations of the Commission, 93 BC communities were listed as Socially and Educationally Backward Classes and divided into four groups, namely, Group A, B, C and D. Subsequently, the BC reservations were extended to public employment.

Various minority organizations had approached the Anantharaman Commission with a request to classify the entire Muslim community as backward. The Commission rejected the request for reservations for Muslims in toto but recommended the inclusion of Dudekula (also known as Laddaf, Pinjari or Noorbash) in the list of BCs. The then Congress government included Dudekulals and Mehtars (from the Muslim community) in Group B and A respectively.

The list of BCs, based on caste and community test, was upheld by the Supreme Court in *State of AP vs U. S. V. Balram* (AIR 1972, SC 1375), overturning the verdict of the AP High Court quashing the BC reservations. The Supreme Court observed that

Even on the assumption that the list is based exclusively on caste, it is clear from the materials before the Commission and the reasons advanced in its report that the entire caste is socially and educationally backward, thus taking the view that a caste is also a class and the reservation in favour of an entire caste is not bad in law.

In 1979, the then Congress government set up the Andhra Pradesh Minorities Commission. The first chairman of the State Minorities Commission was Justice M. A. Ansari, who had retired as Chief Justice of Jammu and Kashmir High Court. The Commission recommended the inclusion of Muslims in the list of BCs based on the criteria of their economic, social and educational backwardness.

In 1982, the second Backward Classes Commission was appointed with a retired IAS officer N. K. Murlidhara Rao with two specific terms of reference, namely, to review the existing list of BCs and to examine the social and educational backwardness of minorities for the purpose of including them in the list of BCs. In its report submitted on August 31, 1982, the Commission recommended increasing the quantum of BC reservations from 25 percent to 44 percent. It added more communities to the BC list, raising the total to 102 communities, including Quraish (Muslim butchers). However, for unspecified reasons, the Commission did not recommend the inclusion of other socially and educationally backward Muslims in the list of BCs.

Accepting these recommendations in July 1986, the AP Government, headed by N. T. Rama Rao of the Telugu Desam Party, raised the quantum of reservations for BCs from 25 percent to 44 percent and added more castes to the list. This led to widespread protests and violent agitation by upper-caste students all over Andhra Pradesh. The increase in the quota was challenged in the AP High Court.

A full bench of the AP High Court, pronouncing its judgment on September 5, 1986, struck down the increase, holding that the increase in reservations is violative of Articles 15 and 16 of the constitution. The total reservations cannot exceed 50 percent as a general rule, subject to marginal adjustments of exigencies so required. The recommendations of the Murlidhara Rao Commission were termed arbitrary and vitiated by several factors.

In 1994, the AP government, led by the Congress party, issued Government Order (GO) MS 30 on August 25, 1994, adding 14 castes/categories, including Muslims, to the list of Backward Classes. The GO was challenged in the AP High Court. A full bench directed the state not to give effect to the GO till the AP Backward Classes Commission headed by retired Justice K. S. Puttuswamy submitted its report. The state government had constituted the AP Backward Classes Commission in January 1994. The government referred the demand for the inclusion of several castes and Muslims in the list of BCs to the Commission.

The Puttuswamy Commission collected the data and held its sittings in the districts and also conducted a socio-economic survey of Muslims and other castes. But for reasons not known, the commission did not submit its report until 2003. The demand for inclusion of 109 castes, besides the Muslims, in the BC list and the demand of 36 existing castes for change from one group to another, remained in limbo for nine long years.

Earlier, in 1989, the first comprehensive study on the socio-economic conditions of minorities in the state was sponsored by the AP Minorities Commission. The study was conducted by a team led by Prof. Abbas Ali of Osmania University on behalf of the Minorities Commission.

The survey brought out the negligible share of Muslims in various sectors and in all walks of life across Andhra Pradesh.

### **Profile of Muslims in AP before 2014 state bifurcation**

The 2001 census estimated the population of all the minorities 82 lakh, which was a little more than 11 percent of the total population of Andhra Pradesh. The population of Muslims was 70 lakhs of which about 58 percent resided in urban areas and the remaining 42 percent in rural areas. Muslims accounted for 19.5 percent of the total urban population and 5.3 percent of the total rural population in the state. Region-wise, 55.15 percent of the Muslims lived in Telangana region (including Hyderabad) 24.20 percent in Rayalaseema and 20.65 percent in coastal Andhra.

Going by the census data for 2001, the proportion of population in the 0–6 age-group was 14.9 percent among Muslims as against the average of 13.3 percent for all religious communities. The literacy rate among Muslims was 68 percent. The male literacy rate among Muslims was 76.5 percent and the female literacy rate among Muslims was 59.1 percent.

The work participation rate among Muslims was, however, lower at 33.8 per cent as against the state average of 45.8 percent. The work participation rate among Muslim males was 50.1 percent as against the state average of 56.2 percent. The work participation rate among Muslim females was 16.8 percent as against the state average of 35.1 percent. In other words, unemployment among Muslims in the state was much higher than the rest of the population.

The distribution of category of workers suggested that there were lower numbers of cultivators and agricultural laborers among Muslims (that is, 7.4 percent and 21.8 percent as against the state average of 22.5 percent and 39.6 percent) mainly because the community was largely urban-based. Consequently, the proportion of household industry workers and other categories of workers at 6.1 percent and 64.6 percent was higher than the average of 4.7 percent and 33.1 percent for all communities.

### **Research studies and reports of committees and commissions**

A number of research studies have shown that the minorities residing in Andhra Pradesh (before bifurcation in 2014) had been economically, educationally and socially backward. The AP State Minorities Commission conducted a comprehensive study on the socio-economic conditions of minorities in the state in 1989 which brought out the negligible share of Muslims in various sectors and all walks of life across AP.

The findings were similar in the report of the AP Commissionerate of Minorities Welfare on Socio-Economic Conditions of Muslim Minorities in AP in 2004, the AP Backward Classes Commission report on Backward Status of Muslims in 2005 and the AP BC Commission report on Socially and Educationally Backward Classes (SEBCs) among Muslims in 2007.

These reports further confirmed that an overwhelming majority of Muslims lived below the poverty line, their share in various economic support schemes had been very low compared to their proportion of population and the community remained steeped in educational deprivation and faced social discrimination in AP.

### **Demand for reservations for Muslims**

The successive chairmen of the AP State Minorities Commission, in over 25 years of its existence (1979–2004), made repeated recommendations for the inclusion of Muslims among backward classes and provision of reservations for them in educational institutions and employment but

without success. Both the successive Congress and Telugu Desam governments set up Cabinet Subcommittees on Minorities Welfare but failed to act on their reports suggesting various measures for socio-economic upliftment of Muslims.

On the eve of the 2004 assembly elections, the Congress party promised in its election manifesto to implement 5 percent reservations for Muslims. The Telugu Desam Party (TDP), which had released its election manifesto without incorporating any promise of reservations for Muslims, later declared that the TDP would provide 3 percent reservations to Muslims if voted back to power.

The Congress regained power in the state and the Chief Minister Dr Y. S. Rajasekhar Reddy fulfilled the party's promise. He issued the GO Ms. No. 33 in July 2004 designating Muslims as a Backward Class and earmarking 5 percent reservations for them in education and public employment by creating a separate BC (E) category.

Almost all the political parties, barring the BJP, welcomed the reservations for Muslims. However, the GO was challenged through public interest litigation in the AP High Court. A Division Bench stayed the GO, thereby suspending the implementation of the 5 percent reservations for Muslims in admission into professional courses such as MBBS, BE/B.Tech, MBA/MCA for the academic year 2004–5.

The Division Bench also referred the batch of writ petitions on the issue to a larger five-member Constitutional Bench of the Court. The larger Bench, in its 183-page judgment pronounced in September 2004, struck down the GO as unconstitutional and ultra vires on four counts: That the Commissionerate of Minorities Welfare acted hastily and the process of identifying and classifying Muslims as a Backward Class was totally vitiated since no proper investigation or enquiry was done; mandatory consultation with AP Backward Classes Commission was not done; the government did not identify the creamy layer and it failed to justify why the overall reservations exceeded the 50 percent limit set by the Supreme Court.

At the same time, the High Court rejected the legal objections and constitutional issues raised by the petitioners. The Bench made a significant observation: "Muslims, as a group, are entitled to social reservations within the constitutional dispensation provided they are identified as socially and educationally backward." The Bench observed that providing reservations to Muslims did not violate the secular character of the constitution. There was, thus, no bar on providing reservations for Muslims if the due process was followed.

The larger Bench gave four key directions: that the state government reconstitute the BC Commission within three months; the government must seek the Commission's opinion on the inclusion of Muslims in the BCs list; the Commission should complete this task within a six-month deadline after the government makes a plea and that the government must lay down the criteria for identification of the creamy layer so that it could be applied while considering Muslims as BCs.

The state government followed the High Court's directions: It reconstituted the BC Commission in November 2004 and made a reference to the Commission seeking its opinion on reservations for Muslims under Articles 15(4) and 16(4) of the constitution. The Commission submitted its report in seven months to Chief Minister Reddy on June 14, 2005.

The Commission recommended the provision of 5 percent reservations for Muslims by excluding the creamy layer of the community from the purview of the quota. It sought de-listing of the existing "castes" of Muslims from the existing BC list and created a separate "E" Category for backward Muslims. The total reservation share stood at 51 percent, 1 percent more than the SC limit of 50 per cent. The Commission explained that the communities and castes covered by all these accounted for 77 percent of the state's population going by the 2001 census.

Accordingly, the Governor promulgated Ordinance No. 13 of 2005 on June 25, 2005, providing for 5 percent reservations for Muslims by including the community in the BC "E" category. Five days later, on June 30, 2005, several activists and students filed a batch of writ petitions challenging the constitutional validity of the Ordinance.

A Division Bench referred the writ petitions to a larger bench without staying the operation of the Ordinance. In the meantime, the Ordinance was replaced by Act No. 21 enacted by the state legislative assembly in October 2005.

In November 2005, the larger Bench comprising five judges, set aside the Government Ordinance, holding it unconstitutional. In four separate but concurring judgments, the five judges cited different reasons for their verdict. They cited mainly five grounds. These were:

1. The Backward Classes Commission considered reservations for one community, while the claims for inclusion of other castes and communities were pending. Hence, its recommendation was defective.
2. Earlier, two commissions—Anantharaman Commission and Murlidhara Rao Commission—which looked into claims of castes and communities for inclusion among Backward Classes refused to recognize the Muslim community as a whole as backward. Hence, the reservations for Muslims were not valid.
3. The BC Commission, in its report recommending reservations for Muslims, did not produce sufficient data and facts to justify its findings.
4. The total reservations for various sections—Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Backward Classes and Muslims, add up to 51 percent. This exceeds the 50 percent ceiling suggested by the Supreme Court and, for this reason, the reservations for Muslims were invalid.
5. The government can provide reservations to Muslims who are backward through proper identification but cannot declare the entire Muslim community as backward.

The Bench was divided 3:2 on the issue of whether Muslims as a community were entitled to reservations. This was a significant departure from the unanimous view taken by the earlier Bench in September 2004 that "Muslims as a group are entitled to affirmative action/social reservations within the Constitutional dispensation, provided they are identified as a socially and educationally Backward Class under Article 15(4) and Backward Class of citizens under Article 16(4) of the Constitution of India."

Only two judges shared this view this time while three of their colleagues passed severe strictures against the government for earmarking "religion-based" reservations by identifying the entire Muslim community as a backward class. The Acting Chief Justice and another judge felt that Muslims could be provided reservations as a backward class.

The judges, in separate judgments, set aside the Ordinance but granted "status quo" on the admissions already effected in professional colleges based on reservations for Muslims. Thus, the 2,688 Muslim students who secured admissions on the basis of the quota in engineering, medical, dental, pharmacy, computer applications and business administration colleges were allowed to pursue their studies.

In December 2005, the state government filed an appeal in the Supreme Court against the High Court judgment. In January 2006, the Supreme Court refused to grant a stay on the High Court verdict. The Apex Court decided to constitute a constitutional bench to hear the appeal but this was not done.

## Four percent reservations for socially and educationally backward Muslims

In the meantime, a fresh exercise was undertaken. The state government referred the limited question of reservations for Muslims to the BC Commission in April 2007. A retired IAS officer P. S. Krishnan, known for his commitment to social justice, was appointed as an advisor to The government in May 2007 and was tasked with carrying out a social-economic survey of the Muslims in the state. He submitted the report entitled *Report on Identification of Socially and Educationally Backward Classes in the Muslim Community of Andhra Pradesh* in June 2007. The BC Commission submitted its report in July 2007 recommending reservations in jobs and education only for those identified socially and educationally backward classes (SEBC) of Muslims and scaling down the quota from 5 percent to 4 percent.

The governor promulgated an Ordinance on July 7, 2007. On July 23, 2007, the state assembly enacted the AP Reservations in favor of the SEBC Muslims Act replacing the Ordinance. The 14 SEBC Muslim groups were included in Backward Class "E" category, were *Achchukattalavandlu, Attar Saibulu, Dhobi, Fakir, Garadi, Gosangi, Guddi Eluguwallu, Hajjam, Labbi, Pakeerla Borevale, Qureshi, Shaik, Siddi, Chakke Takera*, etc.

However, groups like *Syed, Mushaik, Mughal, Pathan, Irani, Arab, Bohra, Shia Imami, Ismaili, Khoja, Cutchi-Memon, Jamayat and Navayat* and all the subgroups of these groups were excluded from the purview of the 4 percent reservation.

This Act was again challenged in the High Court by some activists and students. The admission of the writ petitions faced technical hiccups. The matter was posted first before the then Chief Justice and another judge. The judge recused himself. Two more Benches were constituted to hear the case but two judges, one after another, recused themselves. Finally, the petitions were admitted by a division bench of the Chief Justice and another judge. The Bench, however, refused to grant stay and allowed admissions to be made under the quota subject to the outcome of the petitions. The petitioners approached the Supreme Court which stayed implementation of the reservations in September 2007.

In August 2008, the Apex Court vacated the stay but remanded the issue back to the High Court to dispose of the petitions. Thus, a seven-member Bench of the High Court commenced hearings in August 2008 which continued until February 2009. On February 9, 2010, the High Court pronounced its verdict. The seven-member Bench headed by the then Chief Justice was divided 5:2 and gave three different decisions while striking down the law providing the 4 percent reservations to the backward groups among Muslims.

The Chief Justice and three judges faulted the enactment and said, "it is religion-specific, potentially encourages religious conversions and is thus unsustainable." Echoing the majority view in a separate judgment, another judge faulted the report of the BC Commission. The remaining judges said the government's action was based solely upon the findings and recommendations of the BC Commission. The judges maintained that the Act violated Articles 14, 15(1) and 16(2) of the constitution. They also criticized the BC Commission for its reliance on the recommendations of the report of the socio-economic survey of Muslims by P. S. Krishnan. A senior judge, in his minority judgment, maintained that the seven-judge Bench was not called upon to adjudicate the list of SEBC Muslims but was only required to answer a legal reference. Thus, the majority judgment objected to "religion-based" reservations even for groups of socially and educationally backward Muslims.

The judges faulted the Krishnan Committee report and BC Commission report for deficient data and improper surveys. Unlike the previous judgments, they ruled out affirmative action for the SEBC Muslims under the three relevant articles of the constitution and even went a step further and expressed concern over such reservations potentially encouraging "religious conversions."

There are certain facts that the honorable judges have not considered in all these judgments. What is the basis for providing reservations to SCs, STs and OBCs? The reservations are provided on the ground that these sections of society belonging mainly to the majority community have been oppressed and denied socio-economic and educational benefits for centuries. So, these reservations are also based on religion.

Moreover, when 46 percent reservations are provided to them under the quotas for SCs, STs and BCs together, who among the majority community would be foolish enough to change their religion to avail of the 4 percent quotas for SEBC Muslims?

Apart from a narrow and limited interpretation of the articles of the constitution which provide for reservations for socially and educationally backward sections of society, all these three judgments point to the technical, procedural and legal lapses, mainly the unscientific surveys, insufficient data and perfunctory findings of the Commissionerate of Minorities Welfare, the two reports of the AP BC Commission headed, incidentally, by a former judge of the High Court Dalava Subrahmanyam and the report of P. S. Krishnan's socio-economic survey of Muslims. The first two judgments also faulted the reservations as these exceeded the 50 percent ceiling prescribed by the Supreme Court.

However, the fact remains that the previous state government had been found lacking in plugging the legal loopholes that made its action of providing reservations to Muslims through the inclusion of the community in the Backward Classes "E" category vulnerable to adverse judicial verdicts not once but three times in a row.

Despite the then Chief Minister Dr Y. S. Rajasekhar Reddy's assertions that the government was fully committed to providing reservations for Muslims by overcoming the legal hurdles, the bureaucracy in general and the legal functionaries of the government in particular in the erstwhile undivided AP had shown callousness in defending the government's case in favor of reservations for Muslims.

The then Advocate General could not argue the case properly before the High Court when the larger bench of the court struck down GO Ms. 33 on Muslim reservations as ultra vires on procedural issues in September 2004. Again, the then Advocate General also could not effectively argue the case before the Bench that heard the matter in 2005.

After the GO was replaced by an Act enacted by the state legislative assembly, the state could have sought dismissal of the case on the grounds that the GO which was challenged by the petitioners had lapsed but the Advocate General told the court on the day the verdict was pronounced that the Act was an exact copy of the Ordinance!

During the hearings, when the judges asked the Advocate General to justify the extraordinary circumstances for exceeding the 50 percent ceiling laid down by the Apex Court on the overall quantum of reservations, he quipped that if it was illegal, the judges could reduce it by 1 percent.

The judges wondered how they could do it and how the Advocate General could make such remarks. When the matter was heard again in 2008–9, the then Advocate General was none other than the lawyer who earlier forcefully argued against the reservations for backward Muslims before the division bench in 2004 as the counsel for two student petitioners.

### **Supreme Court's interim directions on 4 percent quota**

In March 2010, the AP government filed a special leave petition in the Supreme Court challenging the judgment of the seven-member Bench of the AP High Court which had quashed the reservation as being unconstitutional on the grounds that it cannot be extended on the basis of religion.

Passing an interim order on the Special Leav Petition on March 25, 2010, the Supreme Court permitted the AP government to provide 4 percent reservation in jobs and education for backward members of the Muslims but referred to a special bench the issue of its constitutional validity.

Refusing to stay the AP High Court's judgment, a three-judge bench consisting of the then Chief Justice K. G. Balakrishnan and Justices J. M. Panchal and B. S. Chauhan said "since it involves important questions of constitution, we are referring the matter to a Constitution Bench" for hearing.

Pending the hearing, 14 Muslim groups identified as socially and educationally backward sections by the AP government were deemed as eligible for the benefits. The Apex Court said that the reservation in favor of Backward Class Group "E" is subject to the outcome of Civil Appeal Nos. 2628-2637/2010, etc. pending before the Court.

While passing the order, the Bench observed:

The Government is of the view that certain sections of the Muslim community are socially and educationally backward. What is wrong in it? It is only a question as to how you identify them. It is not a question as to whether they are Hindus or Muslims but the question is social and educational backwardness. Merely because they are Muslims they cannot be denied ... The socially and educationally backward classes are identified.

The Bench ordered:

As several Constitutional issues are involved in these appeals, as an interim measure, we direct that for the time being, reservation of 4 per cent be extended first to the 14 categories mentioned in the Schedule appended to the AP Reservation in Favour of Socially and Educationally Backward Classes of Muslims Act 2007, excluding creamy layer.

The matter is still pending in the Supreme Court.

### **Consensus among political parties on reservations for SEBC Muslims**

There is positive fallout too from these developments. Almost all the political parties in the State—Congress, Telugu Desam Party, Telangana Rashtra Samithi, Communist Party of India, Communist Party of India-Marxist and All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen—have all extended their full support to reservations for backward sections among Muslims. They have supported the reservations both inside and outside the state legislature. When there was unanimity among the major political parties and various sections of the society on the need and desirability of reservations for Muslims, only the Bharatiya Janata Party, its front organizations and other Sangh Parivar outfits voiced their total opposition to Muslim reservations and their activists dragged the issue to the High Court and the Supreme Court time and again.

### **BC reservations in AP and Telangana states post-bifurcation**

As Andhra Pradesh state was bifurcated into two states under the AP State Reorganisation Act 2014 on June 2, 2014, both the successor states (Telangana and residuary AP) have continued the reservations for the Backward Classes including 14 SEBC Muslim groups, apart from the SCs and STs.

After the creation of Telangana state, the Telangana government issued GO Ms. No. 3 on August 14, 2014, for the adaptation of 112 backward classes/castes/communities and specifying the percentage of reservation in respect of the state BCs list for Telangana. Further, GO Ms. No. 16 was issued on March 11, 2015, effecting some amendments in the group-wise list for specifying the percentages of reservations.

Though there were 138 castes/subcastes in the BC list approved by the erstwhile government of the undivided AP as of June 1, 2014, the Telangana government found on verification that only 112 castes/subcastes pertain to Telangana state. The left-over castes are specific to areas now forming part of the residuary AP state.

The BC list in the residuary AP now consists of 139 castes/subcastes/communities with total quantum of 29 percent reservations. This includes 4 percent reservations for 14 socially and educationally backward Muslim classes included in Group E.

The Government of India has retained 103 out of 112 castes/subcastes under the Central List of Other Backward Classes in respect of residuary AP. Nine castes/subcastes were deleted from the list notified before 2014.

The Central List of OBCs for the State of Telangana has been notified in August 2016 and it consists of 87 castes/subcastes of Backward Classes. Prior to the issue of notification, the National Commission for Backward Classes had conducted public hearings on the inclusion of 73 castes and subcastes in Telangana state consequent to bifurcation of undivided AP.

### **Post-bifurcation: Surge in share of Backward Classes in Telangana**

The state of Telangana was formed on June 2, 2014, after a long struggle, bifurcating the erstwhile state of Andhra Pradesh. One of the challenges the new state encountered was the surge in the share of backward and marginalized sections, including the minorities, in the state. This called for a review of the policies for their upliftment including the percentage of reservations for various categories in educational institutions and public employment.

To begin with, the Telangana government took up the issue of reservations for socially and educationally backward classes, including those among the Muslim community. It constituted a Commission of Inquiry (henceforth referred to as COI) on March 5, 2015, to study the socio-economic and educational conditions of Muslims in the state with G. Sudhir, IAS (Retd) as its chairman.

The COI conducted its inquiry on the socio-economic and educational backwardness of Muslims and submitted a detailed report along with its recommendations on August 12, 2016. The report provided substantial evidence on the social and educational backwardness of certain communities among Muslims in the state. Based on its findings, the COI recommended affirmative action for all-round development of the socially and educationally backward communities among Muslims, including the provision of 12 percent reservations, and, if there is any difficulty, not less than 9 percent, in educational institutions and public employment.

Simultaneously, along with Sudhir Commission, the government of Telangana appointed a Commission of Inquiry on Scheduled Tribes chaired by Dr S. Chellappa, IAS (Retd) in March 2015. The Chellappa Commission on STs also submitted its report in 2016 and recommended enhancement of reservations provided for STs in the state from 6 percent to 10 percent as the state's share of the ST population increased after bifurcation. It also recommended the inclusion of two communities *viz.*, Boya and Kathi Lambadas in the list of STs.

After the COI on Muslims and the COI on STs submitted their reports, the government of Telangana constituted the state's first Telangana State Commission for Backward Classes

(henceforth referred to as the TSCBC) in October 2016, on the lines of the Backward Classes Commission Act 1993, of the undivided Andhra Pradesh.

The state government entrusted the newly constituted TSCBC to examine the report of the Sudhir Commission and its recommendations and suggest measures for the upliftment of backward classes among Muslims. The TSCBC submitted its report in April 2017 and recommended the enhancement of reservations provided for backward classes among Muslims under the category BC (E).

### **Bill to raise SEBC Muslim and ST quota awaits President's nod**

Based on the recommendations of the TSCBC on backward classes and the Chellappa Commission on STs, the government of Telangana passed the Telangana Backward Classes, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Reservation of Seats in Educational Institutions and of Appointments or Posts in the Services under the State) Bill, 2017 on April 16, 2017, in a special session of its legislature incorporating a comprehensive reservation policy.

The Telangana State Reservations Bill 2017 seeks to enhance the quantum of reservation provided for STs from 6 to 10 percent and for the socially and educationally backward classes among Muslims under the BC (E) category from 4 to 12 percent. These provisions of the Bill take the total quantum of reservations to 62 percent, that is, 15 percent for SCs, 10 percent for STs and 37 percent for BCs. This is in excess of the limit of 50 percent imposed by the Supreme Court.

This Bill was referred to the President of India for his assent in 2017. There is little possibility of the Bill getting the President's assent in view of the ideological orientation of the present government led by the BJP at the center.

### **Summary, conclusion and the way forward**

The Government of India had issued an order in August 1990, based on the report of the Second Backward Classes Commission (Mandal Commission), providing 27 percent reservation in central government posts for persons belonging to the Socially and Economically Backward Classes (also referred to as "Other Backward Classes"). Several writ petitions were filed in the Supreme Court challenging this order. Disposing of these petitions by a majority judgment, which is commonly known as the judgment in the Indra Sawhney case, the Apex Court upheld 27 percent reservation for OBCs in civil posts and services under the Union of India, subject to exclusion of the "Creamy Layer."

With the amendment of Article 15 of the constitution in January 2006 and enactment of the Central Educational Institutions (Reservation in Admissions) Act in January 2007, the reservation for OBCs has also been extended to admissions in central educational institutions.

The Central List of OBCs has been issued in respect of 31 states and union territories so far. Four states—Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland—and the Union Territory of Lakshadweep are not covered by OBC quotas. As of March 4, 2014, the central OBC list for different states and union territories contains 2,603 castes and subcastes including 494 castes/subcastes of the Muslim community. The proportion of Muslim castes/subcastes to the total entries comes to 18.98 percent.

Based on the recommendations of the Ranganath Misra Commission, the Government of India issued orders earmarking a sub-quota of 4.5 percent for minorities from within the reservation of 27 percent available to OBCs, in December 2011. The orders stated that the caste/communities of the minorities which are included in the Central List of OBCs shall be covered

by the said sub-quota. These notifications were challenged in the Andhra Pradesh High Court by several activists.

The AP High Court, vide its judgment in May 2012, quashed the sub-quota. The Government of India moved an appeal in the Supreme Court against the High Court judgment, but the Apex Court refused to stay the High Court order. The appeal is pending in the Supreme Court.

While 31 states/union territories have their own list of OBCs, as per information available, ten states and UTs have subcategories of castes/communities in the state list of OBCs. They include Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Jammu and Kashmir, Karnataka, Kerala, Maharashtra, Sikkim, Tamil Nadu, Telangana and West Bengal. Twenty states and four union territories have included Muslim OBC groups in their state and central lists of OBCs, while five states and two union territories have excluded Muslim groups from their OBC lists.

Incidentally, the 14 Socially and Educationally Backward Classes of Muslims included in the State BCs List (Group E) in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana states are not included in the central OBC list for these two states. The central OBC list consists of only three Muslim subcastes (Dudekula/Laddaf/Pinjari/Noorbash, Muslim Mehtar and Quresh/Muslim butchers) in the two states.

The Post-Sachar Evaluation Committee, headed by Prof. Amitabh Kundu, was appointed by the Government of India in August 2013. The Committee, better known as Kundu Committee, was mandated to evaluate the process of implementation of the Sachar Committee recommendations and to recommend corrective measures. The Committee submitted its report to the government in September 2014.

In its report, the Committee said that the country has not yet come to a stage where the reservation policy can be relegated to history for the SCs, STs and OBCs. The Committee pointed out that there are social groups within the Muslim community that are equally deprived and hence must be included in the SC category.

Many of the Muslim artisanal groups can be included in the “Most Backward” subcategory within the OBCs along with other similarly placed caste groups from other religions, based on criteria of socio-economic backwardness. The Ashraf Muslims may be accommodated in the OBC category, or the Most Backward subcategory based on the necessary tests of social backwardness.

The Government of India enacted The Constitution (102nd Amendment) Act 2018 in parliament, inserting Article 338B, after Article 338A, providing for the constitution of a commission for the socially and educationally backward classes to be known as the National Commission for Backward Classes.

The Amendment Act also inserted Article 342A, after Article 342. Sub-Section (1) empowered the President of India, with respect to any state or union territory, and where it is a state, after consultation with the governor thereof, by public notification, specify the socially and educationally backward classes which shall for the purposes of the constitution be deemed to be socially and educationally backward classes in relation to that state or union territory, as the case may be.

Simultaneously, the Government of India enacted the National Commission for Backward Classes (Repeal) Act, 2018, repealing The National Commission for Backward Classes Act 1993 and dissolving the NCBC constituted under the provisions of the 1993 Act. The National Commission for Backward Classes was re-constituted in 2018 under the provisions of the Constitution (102nd) Act 2018.

In January 2019, the Government of India enacted The Constitution (103rd) Amendment Act in the Parliament, extending 10 percent reservation in direct recruitment in government

jobs and for admission in higher educational institutions to the economically weaker sections of the general category.

The amendment added new clauses to Articles 15 and 16 of the constitution. This reservation is meant for the economically weaker sections among all castes and communities who are not eligible under the reservations for SCs, STs and OBCs. The total quantum of reservations, after the introduction of the 10 percent reservation for EWS, is 59.5 percent at the central level.

### **Efforts to provide reservation to Muslim minorities come to nothing**

The efforts of various governments of the undivided Andhra Pradesh to provide reservations for socially and educationally backward Muslim groups for 17 long years encountered adverse judicial verdicts as many as four times which in itself is a case to study. These are listed here:

- GO Ms. 30 issued in 1994 was struck down by a Division Bench of the High Court of two judges.
- Subsequently, GO Ms. 33 issued in 2004, earmarking 5 percent reservations for backward sections of Muslims, was quashed by a larger bench of the High Court.
- In June 2005, an Ordinance was promulgated, and it was later replaced by Act 21 of 2005, providing 5five percent reservations for backward Muslims. The Ordinance and the subsequent Act were set aside by another larger bench of the High Court.
- Another Ordinance was promulgated in July 2007 and replaced with an Act, providing for 4 percent reservations for 14 identified socially and educationally backward groups of Muslims. In February 2010, the 4 percent quota for 14 SEBC Muslim groups was struck down by a larger bench of the High Court. The AP Government filed a Special Leave Petition (SLP) in the Supreme Court against the High Court's judgment. The SLP is still pending in the Supreme Court though the constitutional bench has been constituted to hear the appeal.

### **Key issues concerning reservations for SEBC Muslims**

One of the key issues that needs to be sorted out is the question of raising the quantum of reservations for SEBC Muslims in proportion to their population. A related issue is the quantum of reservations for SEBC Muslims *vis-à-vis* overall reservations.

In the undivided AP, the government had earmarked 5 percent reservations for backward Muslims in 2004 and 2005 but this quantum was reduced to 4 percent for the SEBC Muslims in 2007 so as not to cross the ceiling of 50 percent quotas fixed by the Supreme Court in Indra Sawhney case. The then government of AP had claimed that it had opted to reduce the reservations for backward Muslims from 5 percent to 4 percent so as to comply with the Supreme Court ceiling of 50 percent on reservations.

But this argument is fallacious for two reasons. Nowhere does the constitution lay down the 50 percent ceiling on reservations. Nor does the constitution talk about any specific quantum of reservations for different reserved categories.

The quantum of reservations at the central level is 49.5 percent at present, including 15 percent reservations for SCs, 7.5 percent for STs and 27 percent for OBCs. After every decennial census, the quantum of reservations for SCs and STs is revised in proportion to their population. The revision on the basis of the 2001 and 2011 censuses is overdue.

Nationwide, as per the 2001 census, the proportion of SCs was 16.23 percent and that of STs was 8.2 percent of the total population. The proportion of SCs has gone up to 16.6 percent and

that of STs has increased to 8.6 percent as per the 2011 census. This means that the quantum of reservations at the central level will go up to 52.2 percent when the quantum of reservations is revised for SCs and STs in proportion to the total population on the basis of the 2011 census.

In Telangana state, there are 54.32 lakh SCs as per the 2011 census, constituting 15.44 percent of the total population. There are 32.87 lakh STs, accounting for 9.34 percent of the total population of the state. If the quantum of reservations is revised to 15.44 percent for SCs and 9.34 percent for STs as per the 2011 census in Telangana, the overall existing reservations would cross the 53.78 percent mark, well beyond the limit set by the Supreme Court.

Thus, the reservations for SCs, STs and BCs (excluding SEBC Muslims) together are going to cross the 50 percent mark in the residuary AP and Telangana states. Does this mean even the existing reservations for SEBC Muslims will be dispensed with totally, going by the 50 percent ceiling laid down unilaterally by the Supreme Court based on its mere interpretation of the Right to Equality?

Hence, the residuary Andhra Pradesh and Telangana states need to evolve foolproof legal measures to overcome the restrictions imposed by the Supreme Court on the total quantum of reservations for different sections of society at the state level, especially when the other southern states have a higher quantum of reservations for OBCs, keeping in view the large proportion of the population of the backward classes.

Another issue, at the central level and in different states, is the exclusion of the entire Muslim community from the purview of reservations and extending reservations to only those sections of Muslims who have been identified selectively as “socially and educationally backward classes” in the state concerned.

It may be recalled that the report of retired bureaucrat P. S. Krishnan, who was appointed as advisor to the government on BC welfare in the erstwhile undivided AP, in 2007, was referred to the AP BC Commission for inclusion of 14 groups of Muslims in the BC list, which approved it and recommended to the government. The state government, in turn, approved the recommendation and promulgated an ordinance in July 2007. This was struck down by the AP High Court in 2010.

Surprisingly, both P. S. Krishnan and the AP BC Commission relied on the very judgment of the High Court—which has been challenged by the state government before the Supreme Court—for building up their arguments against the inclusion of the entire Muslim community (excluding creamy layer sections) in the list of backward classes. They also justified their attempts to split the Muslims into caste groups by relying on the same judgment against which the state’s appeal is pending in the Supreme Court. In doing so, the AP BC Commission has repudiated its own report of 2005, recommending 5 percent reservations for all Muslims (excluding the creamy layer).

It may also be mentioned that the governments in the other two southern states of Karnataka and Kerala have given reservations to the entire Muslim community as a group without resorting to dividing them into artificial caste groups. In Tamil Nadu, the total quantum of reservations for SCs, STs and BCs is 69 percent and the constitution’s 76th Amendment was enacted by parliament to place the Tamil Nadu Act 45 of 1994 (relating to reservations) in the Ninth Schedule so that it could get protection under Article 31B of the constitution with regard to judicial review.

Except for the BJP and other outfits of Sangh Parivar, there is unanimity among all political parties in the two Telugu States—residuary AP and Telangana—on the issue of Muslim reservations. When the government brought the bills on Muslim reservations in the state legislature in the erstwhile undivided AP in 2005 and 2007, all the parties (except the BJP) had fully supported the reservations for backward Muslims.

After the enactment of The Constitution (102nd) Amendment Act 2018 conferring statutory status on the National Commission for Backward Classes Act, the President (that is, the Government of India) is empowered to specify the socially and educationally backward classes in relation to a state, in consultation with the governor of the state. This means that the states no longer have the powers to alter the state BC lists without the concurrence and clearance from the Government of India.

Unless these issues are sorted out, the 4.5 percent sub-quota for minorities out of the 27 percent OBC reservations would remain in a state of limbo while the sword of Damocles would continue to hang over the future of the 4 percent reservations for 14 SEBC Muslim groups in the two Telugu states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana.

It would augur well if all the political parties represented in the parliament evolved a consensus on the issue of quotas or sub-quotas for the socially and educationally backward minorities, including Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Jains and Buddhists, on par with the Other Backward Classes. Already, the Government of India has earmarked 10 percent reservations of the Economically Weaker Sections of the general category (that is, upper castes and minority communities). Incidentally, by bringing The Constitution (103rd) Amendment Act 2019 providing 10 percent reservations for the EWS category, the Government of India has breached the 50 percent ceiling laid down by the Supreme Court on the total quantum of reservations as the total reservations now add to 60 percent. Thus, there is no *Lakshman Rekha* or limit on the quantum of reservations any longer. Several states, too, have overshot the 50 percent ceiling in the reservations provided for different groups.

### **Future course of action**

The OBCs belonging to the majority community also need to be assured that the quotas or sub-quotas for the SEBC groups of minorities would not eat into their quotas. The Government of India also needs to take an expeditious decision on conferring reservations on the Dalit Muslims and Dalit Christians, on par with Dalits belonging to Hindu, Sikh and Buddhist communities.

### **Need for studies on reservations**

Studies need to be undertaken on the OBC quotas in various states and union territories in terms of the castes/communities included in the central and state OBC lists, the quantum of quotas, the benefits that have accrued from the OBC quotas to the backward sections of the majority community and the minorities (particularly Muslims and Christians).

Another study can be taken up on the policy making in post-independence India with regard to the inclusion/exclusion of Muslim OBCs in the process of modernization and development in terms of their political, economic, social and cultural empowerment.

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# 24

## STATUS OF BACKWARD-CASTE ARTISANS IN INDIA

### An Appraisal

*K. Murali Manohar*

The existence of a caste system based on “superior–subordinate” gradation of people clearly indicates the “social backwardness” of the society, and this particular aspect i.e., relegation of defined sections of people to inequality, is found perhaps only in India. Such an “encoded social system” denies human rights, dignity of labor and social equality on the basis of classification that has its roots in religious writings. In India, the Hindu society is divided into various castes and subcastes in a hierarchical manner and the division is rooted in particularly making people “to do and not to do certain things.” The lower the level of the caste in hierarchy, the greater is the discrimination; the people of such castes are condemned to perform tasks that involve heavy physical labor, are monotonous, involving drudgery, menial and unclean tasks on behalf of society.

Backward Caste (BC/OBC) Artisan and Service Castes, who are placed at the intermediary and lower levels, produce the goods and services needed every day by society. They were exclusively assigned the role of performing various tasks on behalf of society, which are essential for it. But despite the fact that their role was significant, they were pushed down to the lower level of the social ladder, away from the mainstream of society. For several centuries in the name of religion, traditional beliefs and customs and later, in the name of even “development,” these groups were forced to slow down in every aspect of socio-economic and political life. Since the caste system attains its sanctity from religious writings, emancipation from the rigid classification has been difficult for the lower groups. The belief in religion has singularly contributed to these obnoxious practices.

Further, caste had been for a long time represented not only as a religious phenomenon but has been sustained by a unique set of rituals, rigorous beliefs, attitudes and practices relating to purity and pollution. The hold of caste over a person’s social life and practice is more capricious than that of religion and much more so than that of language and habits. The rules relating to marriage, social activity, occupational difference, inter-dining, sharing food, accepting water and so on, are considered to be central to the practice of caste; the level of a caste in the caste ladder is thus determined.

The caste system is governed by the twin principles of division of work and division of people based on hierarchy. Briefly, the principle of division (also called separation, difference, segmentation, repulsion) of people refers to the division of Hindu society into a number of groups

and subgroups with certain characteristics. The principle of hierarchy refers to the arrangement of these groups or divisions into a gradation of high and low. Frequently, the hierarchical relations between caste groups are described as vertical relations (everybody above the base has a feeling of superiority over the group below) and the caste groups themselves as horizontal units. Thus, the caste system has both vertical and horizontal dimensions. In so far as the OBCs are concerned, they are considered to be “backward castes,” both legally and otherwise, as both the principles as presented above are involved in any discussion of them.

It has been clearly said that the lines of exploitation in pre-British India especially in terms of production, extraction and accumulation of surplus, were structured through what is known the “Hierarchical Caste System.” This unequal socio-economic system has existed for more than 2,500 years and continues to survive even now in the country, as it has evolved a caste division of labor involving specific forms of domination, hegemony and subordination. In most of the villages, based on Primary Occupations, at least three major groups are clearly identified: First, Peasant Proprietary Castes, most of which are landlords (absent or present) or economically prospering cultivating castes (rich peasants), who sometimes have held some powers that are wielded traditionally, since they are at the higher level in the caste hierarchy. These castes include the three dominant segments of varna system such as Brahmin, Kshatriya and Vyshyas.

Second, there are about 64 types of caste-based occupational groups and around 90 percent of them either perform particular caste-based occupational functions within a Jajmani system or are self-employed in terms of livelihood. These mostly belong to intermediary castes popularly now known as Backward Castes (BCs) or Other Backward Castes (OBCs). A large contingent of laborers working for the village and its dominant castes include lower-level Semi-Nomadic Castes, De-notified Tribes (DNTs) and others who eke out their livelihood by practicing various kinds of arts, providing entertainment, and so on.

The third group consists of the numerically dominant “untouchables” and the other excluded groups, the Tribals, Adivasis and Pastoralists found mostly outside the village or in forests were also among the most exploited sections but with a difference in degree. Thus, the exploited segments as a whole include a very wide spectrum of castes ranging from backward artisan and service castes to Adivasis, constituting the broad toiling majority.

Thus, the large majority of various toiling, deprived and exploited castes known in legal terms as backward classes, which is the general term applied to the above three different categories of people who have been identified as Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs) and BCs together constitute more than three-fourths of the total population of India. Among the three, the OBCs constitute more than half of the population of the country, in terms of numerical strength (and also a number of castes). The term *Other Backward Classes* that was widely used by the British administration for some time, came to mean Other Backward Castes, “OBCs,” in administrative usage. Later, the term has been used in the Constitution of India mainly to designate those “backward classes” other than Scheduled Castes and Tribes.

The OBCs termed as backward classes in policy matters and bureaucratic circles had theoretical limitation. In the caste hierarchy as practiced in the country, the OBCs occupy the middle position: above the SCs, and lower to the “twice born” castes or dominant castes, also known as upper castes. However, the social and economic position of the OBCs is a little higher in some cases or in some other cases equivalent to that of SCs or sometimes even below the level of several subcastes of SCs although the principle of untouchability is not applicable to them. Overall, a significantly large proportion of them continue to lead miserable lives. Legally, all the Semi-Nomadic and DNTs are also placed under the OBC category for “reservation” purposes.

Prior to the 1931 census, the census form had a provision to indicate “caste/community.” However, after the 1931 census, this column in the subsequent census enumerations was elimi-

nated. Post-independence too, no government thought it necessary to include “caste” for enumeration, not even to get an understanding of the under-development of the different castes and using the data for evolving suitable development strategies. Thus, to date, there are no reliable estimates of the populations of the different castes/communities. Besides, some communities whose traditional occupations involved manual work that was looked down upon and the very caste name evoked contempt and was used as an abuse term felt the need to change the community’s name to escape the stereotyping and perhaps even elevate themselves in the Brahminical society. For example, the barber caste has been renamed as Naayi Brahmin, blacksmith as Vishwabrahmin, fishing community as Agnikula Kshatriya or Gangaputra. Therefore, to get an estimate of the population of different castes by applying the 1931 census data too has been rendered difficult due to such reasons. Nevertheless, it should be noted that to estimate the backward class population, there is no other way except to rely on the figures of the 1931 census and arrive at the population *on a pro-rata basis*. The AP Backward Classes Commission (or the Muralidhar Rao Commission as it is known) as well as the Mandal Commission set up by the central government, estimated the backward class population at 52 percent by applying this methodology.

Several sample surveys were conducted at both central and state levels for the implementation of poverty alleviation programs. No survey or committee estimated the population of backward classes at less than 38 percent. The recent National Family Health Survey conducted by a central government agency estimated the BC population at 41 percent after interviewing 2 lakh people across the country. Although these figures cannot throw much light with regard to exact numbers of the backward class population, it should be at least agreed that their population will be anywhere between 38 percent, which is the lowest according to some sample surveys and 52 percent according to the Mandal Commission Report.

### **Backward class or caste?**

During the pre-independence period, some princely states and also the British colonial government enacted preferential policies for the “Depressed Classes,” which included communities that were classified as “backward” as well as for the untouchables, tribals and some non-Hindu communities (Deshpande and Ramachandran 2014). Even though there were preferential policies for the “backward classes,” their definition had not been clearly articulated (Galanter 1984). Even before the constitution of an independent India came into effect in 1950, several states formed the category of OBCs for the first time and granted them benefits as in Bihar in 1947 and Uttar Pradesh in 1948. Those states that had already granted them special benefits during the pre-independence period, expanded them after independence.

At the time of adopting the constitution, the term used in Article 16(4) was “Backward Class” which included all backward class citizens i.e., SCs, STs and OBCs. The members of the constituent assembly who were all drawn from upper caste and affluent sections of the society with Western education, debated this issue for over three years and, not able to arrive at a consensus, they chose to leave the issue of upliftment of the backward classes to the government that would take over the reins of an independent India by incorporating Article 340 into the Constitution of India. Under this Article, the President could appoint a commission to investigate the conditions of socially and educationally backward classes, and the difficulties under which they labor and to make recommendations with regard to the steps to be taken to bring them on par with the advanced sections of the society. After the communal Government Order (GO) that was in vogue in composite Madras state prior to independence was struck down by the courts, the first constitutional amendment was made by incorporating Article 15(4). The

words used in this clause are “socially and educationally backward class” which was referred to in Article 340. When this amendment was moved, some of the members in the parliament insisted that any backwardness must be related to economic backwardness. The same was emphatically rejected by the then Prime Minister who said that economic backwardness is a temporary one, while social and educational backwardness is permanent and hereditary. Thus, legally speaking the “class” has been used to denote “caste” which facilitated the government to identify the “backward castes” so as to categorize them as “backward classes.”

Significantly the First Backward Classes Commission headed by Kaka Kalelkar (1953–5) broadly defined OBCs apart from others, as “Those who are driven to the necessity of working with their own hands,” those who are landless, not having sufficient capital, those who labor under the sun and in open air, etc., are to be considered as backward classes. It further divided these castes into OBCs, Most Backward Classes, Nomadic or Semi Nomadic Communities for the purpose of extending welfare programs. Thus, the Commission prepared a list of 2,399 social groups, which comprised about 32 percent of the population. It further listed the criteria of backwardness which included trade and occupation, security of employment, educational attainment, employment in government service and position in the social hierarchy. This meant that backwardness was defined or understood in terms of the social (Report of the Backward Classes Commission-Kaka Kalelkar 1956).

The Second Backward Classes Commission under the Chairmanship of B. P. Mandal, after a thorough scientific investigation and the help of experts from various disciplines, worked out 11 indicators to determine social backwardness. The 11 indicators formulated by the Commission were grouped under three broad headings, i.e., social, educational and economic. These are

***Social:***

1. Castes/classes considered as socially backward by others.
2. Castes/classes which mainly depend on manual labor for their livelihoods.
3. Castes/classes where the percentage of married women below 17 years of age is 25 percent above the state average in rural areas, and 10 percent in urban areas; and that of married men is 10 percent and 5 percent above the state average in rural and urban areas respectively.
4. Castes/classes where participation of females in work is at least 25 percent above the state average.

***Education:***

5. Castes/classes where the number of children in the age group of 5–15 years who have never attended school is at least 25 percent above the state average.
6. Castes/classes where that rate of student dropout in the age group of 5–15 years is at least 25 percent above the state average.
7. Castes/classes amongst whom the proportion of matriculates is at least 25 percent below the state average.

***Economic:***

8. Castes/classes where the average value of family assets is at least 25 percent below the state average.

9. Castes/classes where the number of families living in a *kutcha* house is at least 25 percent above the state average.
10. Castes/classes where the source of drinking water is more than half a kilometer for more than 50 percent of the households.
11. Castes/classes where the number of households having taken a consumption loan is at least 25 percent above the state average.

The actual figures drawn from the available data indicate, in every sense, that a large majority (more than 80 percent) of OBCs stand much below the state and national averages. Based on this, the Commission identified 3,743 caste groups as backward, which comprised 52 percent of the population (Report of the Backward Classes Commission: B. P. Mandal 1980). Since the identification of OBCs is done at the state level, their categorization may differ from state to state. Several of the communities classified as OBCs are invariably occupational castes (Report of the Backward Classes Commission: Justice Muralidhar Rao 1982). Let us study the example of a state level exercise by the then Andhra Pradesh government which was one of the earliest states to introduce reservations. The cabinet subcommittee appointed by the government of Andhra Pradesh adopted the criteria by taking into consideration i) poverty, ii) low standards of education, iii) low standards of living, iv) place of habitation, v) inferiority of occupation, and vi) caste. It is important to note that caste has been a common criterion in defining and preparing the OBC list.

The controversy relating to the definition of class and caste was resolved in the case of *P. Rajendran vs State of Madras* 18 years after the constitution was promulgated wherein it was held that “class” is synonymous with that of “caste” and that “class is nothing but a cluster of castes.” The judgment was not implemented uniformly in all states. The said principle was followed in later cases after it received the approval by a nine-judge Bench of the Supreme Court in *Indra Sawhney vs Union of India*, the case wherein the decision of central government to provide for reservations in public employment was upheld (Justice B. S. A. Swamy 2005).

The OBCs are defined popularly as “producing castes” either in agriculture or in secondary manufacturing through household handicraft production or in guilds of goods that were of common use for society in general or a particular section of society. All these castes were made up of dependent “jatis,” whether as peasants or agricultural labor or occupational groups or artisan sections or caste-based occupational groups, who generally depended upon upper castes/ dominant castes in the rural areas for their livelihood; dependence in other words, was of a “collective” kind unlike individual European serfs or the earlier “slave.” The OBCs exist all over the country in general and almost in every village. It may be said that with marginal exceptions, all the OBCs would fall under the category of secondary deprived sections. In terms of social deprivation, the OBCs are given a lower position except in untouchability.

### **Defining the BC/OBC artisan castes?**

An artisan, also called craftsman, constitutes a distinct kind of skilled manual worker who uses hand tools and produces goods and services for the use of communities and society. The artisans make the product with the creativity and hard work of their hands. As far OBC artisans are concerned, the skills of the caste occupation are transferred hereditarily from one generation to the other. They defy standard classifications and characterization of industrial labor in the classical sense mainly because of the traditional skill acquisition and transfer system, mode of application of the qualities of head, heart and hands to their work, the practice of combining design process with execution, ardent belief in the pursuit of work (selection of raw materials, tools, com-

mencement of work, etc.,), belief in caste association and most notably, their attitude to work (Shankaran 2011). In other words, the artisan is a self- or own-account worker or a wage earner engaged in the manufacture of tangible products, or a service largely through the application of his/her skills with simple tools which were acquired traditionally or developed by observation on his/her own without any formal training. These include Rajaka (washermen), Nayee Brahmin (barber), Darzi (tailor), Teli (oil presser), Padmashali (weaver), Sonar or Avusula (goldsmith), Kapu or Kambi (cultivator), Kammari (ironsmith), Kummarri (potter), Vadrange (carpenter), Medari (juggler), Rangraj (painter), Dudekula (cotton cleaner), Pamula (snake charmer), Mandula (traditional medicants) and so on.

According to UNESCO,

Artisanal products are those produced by artisans, either completely by hand or with the help of hand tools or even mechanical means, as long as the direct manual contribution of the artisan remains the most substantial component of the “finished product.” These are produced using raw materials from sustainable resources. The special nature of artisanal products derives from their distinctive features, which can be utilitarian, aesthetic, artistic, creative, culturally attached, decorative, functional, traditional, religiously and socially symbolic and significant.

(Shankaran 2011)

This study focuses its attention mainly on the status of the traditional occupations of OBCs in India in general, and of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana in particular. In the process, it makes a general review of studies already undertaken on the subject, attempts to define the terms OBCs and OBC artisans, provides a macro perspective of OBC artisans’ occupational economy in India and finally, focuses its attention on OBC artisans in (erstwhile undivided) Andhra Pradesh with the analysis of available data and statistics on the subject. The study is a descriptive study mainly analyzing the data available through secondary sources. However, it has its own limitations of generalization of the phenomenon. Care, however, has been taken to discuss all major issues relevant to the general status of OBC artisans.

### **Studies on artisans**

In the whole range of studies on the socio-economic history and development, the focus of most has been on the study of agrarian social structure, particularly the landlords, peasant-proprietors, tenants and moneylenders who were undergoing rearrangements and readjustments under the changing conditions. However, the artisans or the handicraftsmen specializing in their inherited skills and working in family groups or as individuals in villages and towns and cities forming almost half of society, have been the last to receive serious attention from historians and other social scientists.

The available literature on OBCs in the country may be broadly classified into six categories.

1. Studies on OBC thinkers or philosophers or those ideologs whose contributions provided rich literature on all “exploited” people including OBCs.
2. The contributions and various interpretations of the writings of prominent thinkers and scholars such as Mahatma Phule, Ramaswamy Periyar, Shahu Maharaj, Narayana Guru, B. R. Ambedkar are rich sources of information.
3. General studies covering the one or more dimensions of the overall problems of OBCs of scholars such as G. S. Ghurve, Hutton, William Wiser, Gail Omvedt, Kancha Iliaiah, Rudolph

and Rudolph, Ghanshyam, Marc Galanter, Javeed Alam, Hugrey, Veeramani, K. L. Sharma, C. I. Anand, Andre Beteille, P. K. Bose, Cardyn Elliott, Bernard Cohen, I. P. Desai, Dipankar Gupta, R. L. Hardgrave, Atul Kohli, E. Venkatesu, Ranjani Reddy, G. Satyanarayana, D. L. Seth, K. Srinivasulu, K. C. Suri, Narendra Jadav, Harish Damodaran and Christophe Jaffrelot are some of the prominent writers who made serious attempts to directly or indirectly deal with some of the critical issues relating to OBCs.

4. The reports of National OBC Commissions led by Kaka Kalelkar and B. P. Mandal, State BC Commissions in Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Tamilnadu and certain other states, reports of Sachar Commission, Balakrishna Reneke Commission and Srikrishna Commission on Telangana provide important data on the socio-economic conditions of various OBC and other communities.
5. Sociological and anthropological studies mainly revolving around “caste” as a social or cultural category dealing with aspects such as kinship, marriage, family, hierarchy of relations, associational pattern, traditions, occupational pattern, customs, rituals, other socio-cultural relations, modernization process and other aspects. Prominent among those who authored these studies are Srinivas (1966), Andre Beteille, Dipanker Gupta, Rudolph and Rudolph, A. R. Desai and Galanter (1984).
6. Studies in OBC occupational economy, work pattern, labor relations, work participation, production and distribution, income generation, assets, savings and others are found in the works of Harish Damodaran, A. Deshpande, K. L. Sharma and Ashutosh Varshney.
7. Studies on policies relating to protective discrimination, reservations, politics of accommodation or assimilation, development programs and their implementation; studies on development issues, supportive administrative mechanism and its functional pattern, evaluation studies on government schemes and programs and assessment of the impact on their socio-economic development and others of K. C. Yadav, Francine Frankal, Rajni Kothari and Christophe Jaffrelot, were useful.

### **Micro level or general thematic studies**

It may be observed that most of the studies are invariably found as general studies or focused micro-level studies covering one or other issues or problems pertaining to one or more number of caste groups. Wide gaps exist in the available literature relating to some of the vital socio-economic issues and other developmental concerns. There are hardly any macro studies which deal with the artisan and service caste groups, their emerging problems and issues or their degradation, impact of development programs and so on. This may be the major limitation of the subject matter available.

These works do not analyze the impact of these developments on different sections of Indian society or the response of the people. Nor do these works present an integrated picture of social and economic change under colonial rule or in the post-independence era. They are, however, useful in presenting an overview of the general social and economic conditions of society.

In the absence of studies undertaken by academics, the census reports remain the most important source of our information on the artisan castes and professions. By putting together the information provided in the gazettes, it is possible to get a fair picture of the economic conditions of the artisans in the traditional setup, especially in the pre-independence period; survey of artisans in some states and village surveys conducted as part of census studies also throw some light on physical and occupational mobility among the artisans.

However, non-comparability of the data is a serious difficulty that we face while using the census data. “Even were it possible to reconcile all definitional differences between the cen-

sus,” it is almost impossible to compare the data provided in one census report with that given in another. Notwithstanding the discrepancies in figures and the lack of uniform criteria for classification, the variety of information provided by the census and other official reports on the artisans is invaluable. On the basis of this information, supplemented by non-government sources, field work and oral evidence, it has been considered possible to identify the trends and arrive at some broad generalizations about the changing social relationships consequent upon the changes in the socio-economic condition of the artisans in southern India.

There is “complete” paucity of information relating to the socio-economic background of various social groups, especially in relation to their degradation over the years such as the nature of exploitation and the collapse of their economy; sectors and levels of their occupation; the nature of shift in their occupational pattern; per capita income-pattern; standard of living; pattern of consumer expenditure; quality of housing; land ownership; other asset position; ownership of non-farm production units; literacy, schooling and dropout; higher or technical education; migration trends; state policies for their overall development.

Studies on artisan women from amongst the OBC castes are completely lacking. Artisan women invariably face double discrimination, both within the family and outside, and are more vulnerable to multiple disadvantages. This particular aspect has received hardly any attention. The gender-gap in these communities needs to be studied with a special focus. Like women, children also face multiple disadvantages and “focused studies” on the children of artisan communities are also lacking. National Sample Survey reports available on this aspect cover only a few artisan and service caste groups of some regions but there are not many nationwide studies. Studies leading to degrees such as Ph.D. or M.Phil. covering the major issues relating to these social groups are also not available.

A general review of available studies on the subject chosen indicates “absolute neglect” of the area and a “near-total paucity of macro level data and information.” In this background, it is also worth quoting the statement of the Planning Commission made in XI Five Year Plan Document (Chapter 6 entitled “Social Justice” in Col. 6.11, p. 118) which categorically says, “State-wise, OBC-wise data on population as well as vital and demographic variables are not available which is the main hurdle in the formulation of policies and programmes for the development of Other Backward Classes (OBCs)” (Planning Commission 2012). Extensive nationwide variable data on OBCs as well as in-depth caste-wise status reports or case studies are also not available.

### **OBC artisans in the past and present: A macro perspective**

In the traditional socio-economic set up, artisans were an integral part of the village society. They were all identified by their castes corresponding to their inherited skills. The majority of the artisans for centuries were concentrated in the countryside of the well-cultivated and more populous areas of the state. The concentration of the artisans in the agriculturally well-developed areas was obviously due to their usefulness and external support in all sorts of agriculture operations from sowing to reaping and to the selling of the crop. The artisans provided the services and furnished agricultural implements to the village society according to their specialized skills under a kind of social contract arrangement and shared with the landowners mutual obligations for work and payment. Alongside, they had fixed duties assigned by tradition. The remuneration of artisans was determined by local customs, and they were paid in kind by a fixed share of the produce from land. The blacksmiths, carpenters and potters were paid at almost the same rates. They were also allowed to have the last pickings of agricultural products.

On social occasions like marriages and births, the artisans made ritual accessories for their patrons for which they were entitled to a fixed fee. Clothes and ornaments were furnished

by the weavers and goldsmiths. The artisans, barring the goldsmiths perhaps, were employed during the sowing and reaping of the harvest as field laborers. They were paid separately for serving in their non-professional capacity for the weeding, reaping, threshing, sifting and stacking of the crops.

The artisans barely subsisted on the meager payments received for performing various professional and non-professional services. They were the first victims of any failure in crops caused by famines, floods, droughts or epidemics. Being the poorest and living a hand-to-mouth existence they did not have the means to tide over the difficult phases. The chances of an average artisan to supplement his income by working outside the village or by supplying goods to the neighboring towns and villages too were not many. The artisans, thus, depended upon the agriculturists who invariably belonged to the upper castes and had an upper hand in the traditional economic and social relationships in the village.

The artisans, particularly in large villages and in towns and cities, were expected to live within their separate residential enclosures which were known by the caste name of those who occupied it as in *Chakaliwada* (the area or locality of washers), *Mangaliwada* (the area or locality of barbers), *Kurmawada* (the area or locality of sheep-/cattle-breeders), *Kummariwada* (the area or locality of potters), etc. Even when the artisans understood that their low economic level and corresponding social status was because they occupy lower positions in the caste hierarchy in relation to the upper castes and nature of their occupational dependency, they continued to work in the same capacities because the system guaranteed them a living. Perhaps because the landowning castes also would not easily allow them to move outside of their hegemony, there had been very few openings for the artisans outside the traditional relationships.

Considerable inroads into the traditional socio-economic set up were made within a few decades of British rule. With the extension of agriculture and its increasing commercialization, supported by the development of the means of communications, the villages were more effectively integrated with markets within and outside the state. Under new conditions, the agriculturists produced for sale in the market for cash. By the 1920s, the market purpose dominated the nature of cultivation in all the well-developed agricultural regions of the province. At the same time, greater interactions between the urban and rural areas facilitated the infiltration of factory-made goods and mill-made cloth into villages hitting directly the income of village artisans.

During the colonial period, destruction of the traditional occupations took place for the expansion of the market for goods produced by modern industries. The strategy of the colonial master was to export the locally available raw material to England and import machine-based commodities, which posed stiff competition to the local products which were unable to compete with them in the market. Gradually, over the years, caste-based traditional occupations declined during the colonial period. Subsequently, traditional craftsmen and artisans were forced to either enter the agriculture sector as laborers or leave the village and migrate to other regions and states in search of livelihood.

However, in spite of the colonial destruction of traditional occupations, it may be observed that a large number of artisan castes continue to play a significant role next only to agriculture in the rural economy even in the post-independence period. However, the economic conditions of these artisan castes have deteriorated and their lives have degraded.

The unity and complementarity between agricultural production and artisanal production in villages was thus disrupted and changes in social and professional relationships between the artisans and agriculturists became its natural corollary. The loosening of the grip of age-old economic relations, however, was slow. From the regular exchange of services paid at each harvest it gradually moved towards the curtailment of their traditional support followed by its payment in cash and finally by the isolated exchange without any other obligation. With the decline in

their regular income, the artisans were pushed out of their traditional socio-economic order to find “new opportunities” outside. The new opportunities—educational, economic and political—which were supposed to be caste-free, at least in theory, helped to an extent some of the enterprising individuals and kin groups among the artisan castes to pull them out of their state of uncertainty and traditional bondage.

Various developments like the colonization of land under the canal system, extension of cultivation, development of the means of communications, commercialization of agriculture, growth of industry and the service sector and the spread of literacy opened up, in a limited manner undoubtedly, new avenues of employment. Those artisan castes of some of the better-off families who could get their children educated and shift to other avenues like business and industry reaped the benefits of change in the early stages. In this context, the occupational groups drawn from the coastal region of Andhra Pradesh belong to the first generation affected by the changes as well as the first generation to reap the benefits.

As the governmental and non-governmental organizations use their own terminology which may not be able to specifically explain the economic position of OBC occupational groups at the macro level, most of the organizations found classifying their “economy” as “unorganized” and/or informal. Their family-oriented occupational work units are also known as Tiny or Micro or Small enterprises, and Own Account Enterprises (OAEs). Despite the fact that the so-called family-based, tiny or OAEs (units) constitute more than three-fourths of production or service units of the economy, their role and problems have not been properly addressed and appropriately analyzed. The Asia/Pacific Equity Research Paper of Credit Suisse, 2013, says:

The intuitive habit of drawing macro-economic conclusions (about India) from the corporate feedback (and vice versa) is fraught with risk. After all, only half of India’s GDP and 10 percent of India’s employment are in the formal sector. Further, only a fraction of the formal sector is listed.

The corporate sector generates only 15 percent of national consumption, and that too the share of the “listed industries” in it comprise a mere 4 percent. The celebrated private corporates such as the IT and auto sectors, have added 3.7 million jobs in almost three decades (from 1991), which is far below the expectations of many an expert. The Credit Suisse report rightly concludes, that the corporate “tail is unlikely to wag the dog,” namely the national economy.

The report further adds that this informal economy provides jobs for millions of people while the so-called formal or corporate sector’s contribution to employment is marginal, in that it provides jobs to just over 14 million people. The report adds for good measure that the informal economy is “the backbone of the Indian economy. The informal economy in India represents the unincorporated, namely unregistered, businesses. As per the size of the informal economy, the Credit Suisse study says that unincorporated businesses account for 84 percent of the non-formal employment in India against 4–6 percent in “developed” nations. The report coincides with the findings of the National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) Survey 2011 which says that this particular sector comprises 57.7 million non-corporate business units outside the huge construction sector. And 70 percent of them are unregistered, says the NSSO. They are the fastest growing since 1991, almost doubling since 1998. Post-liberalization, the share of jobs in the organized sector came down from 8 to 7 percent. The NSSO estimates that out of a total of 57.7 million units, as many as 85 percent are OAEs, that is, self-employed units. The rest are “Establishments” employing outside labor. A majority of these 57.7 million units operate in rural areas, the most difficult terrain for the government to provide non-farming jobs. They add an aggregate value of Rs6.28 lakh crore to the national economy, and their value addition

per unit being Rs1.09 lakh per worker. More than two-thirds of them are engaged in trade and services and the rest in manufacturing.

The NSSO survey says that two-thirds of the sector are owned by STs, SCs and OBCs who operate 71 percent of manufacturing units and 60 percent of trading in rural areas. They run 72 percent of the OAEs with the OBCs accounting for 48 percent and SCs 14 percent. This sector generates entrepreneurs of the OBCs, SCs and STs almost like an open university. In contrast, the elite Indian Institutes of Management generates jobseekers, not entrepreneurs.

The Economic Census 2005 revealed that this massive sector provides 90 percent of non-farming employment but a mere 4 percent accessed institutionalized finance; the rest depend on to usurious moneylenders. Banks in India almost monopolize national cash savings. The bank deposit to GDP ratio in India has more than doubled to 71 percent from 1991 to 2014. Since more than 70 percent of the 57.7 million units is unregistered, they cannot access banks for finance. The registered units too are unable to access credit from banks mainly due to the attitude of the bankers towards the low-caste, little-educated entrepreneurs with the result that their share of bank credit fell by half between 1994 and 2008. While they got little support from the government post-independence, resulting in the deterioration of their conditions, the liberalization-privatization-globalization ushered in as part of economic reforms in the 1990s, opened the doors to multinational companies to the everyday life of the people and destroyed the production and service structures of the traditional artisans.

Changes of occupation by the artisans in the early stages was, thus, largely towards agriculture and later on towards industry where they could employ their skills and energies more effectively and advantageously. These changes, however, did not help them in any significant manner to improve their social status. They continued to be evaluated with reference to their caste, which remained the source of frustration and discontent. The increasing educational opportunities, however, opened up avenues of change for a section of them.

Occupational mobility among the artisan castes brought them face to face with new situations in their social relationships with other castes as well as within their own castes; the mobile artisans wanted to get out of the rut of the social disabilities imposed on them for centuries. However, their level of mobility was limited except in the case of the Padmashali or weavers who moved to Gujarat, Maharashtra and other places and found employment in cotton mills. Those who shifted totally from their occupation in search of new avenues went to far-off places including Gulf countries as laborers. Those who had improved their socio-economic position through regular income, tried to achieve a higher social status for themselves by adopting customs, manners and eating habits of the groups traditionally superior to themselves. In the process, they tended to move out of the localities they earlier lived in and to even disassociate themselves from the parent exogamous or kin group.

Those who changed their occupations through education and other training managed to become teachers, lawyers, clerks and officers. They could not get the recognition commensurate with their new occupations and improved economic conditions. This situation however encouraged the lower castes in general and the artisan castes in particular, to seek to transform the existing norms of social interaction. There are wide variations in these caste groups in terms of their place of living, region, language, work pattern, social practices and so on. It is thus difficult to study and understand the all-India phenomena of OBCs unless we conduct a long-term study and analyze various facets.

### **Analysis of the socio-economic status of artisans**

An analysis of available data indicates that the socio-economic conditions of the OBCs have been deteriorating over the years. Similar analysis of the OBC occupational groups at the micro level

indicates that they are poor, usually have large-sized families and everyone in the family irrespective of age participate in the labor market. Around 80 percent of them are individualized family enterprises, 40 to 50 percent of the households does it as primary activity, and it is found that the older the person in the family, the greater is the participation in the activity. There is no concept of “child labor” in the families since children join the activity of the family at an early age. More than 50 percent of the households and especially all those above the age of 50 years are non-literate. The extent of illiteracy is high among the female population. Formal education does not appear to receive any priority as an appreciable school-going age population is still found outside the schools and colleges. Most of them received no formal training but learnt their skill while doing the work with their elders in the family. Not many families own cultivable agricultural land but go for agricultural work as labor during the season. More than 70 percent of the families live in a *kutcha* or *semi-pukka* house and more than 70 percent still lives in the village. They work for long hours and there is no regularity of timing of work. The working environment is not very congenial as even basic amenities like toilets, drinking water, lighting, etc., are lacking. Most of the family enterprises are unregistered. Those who work as “contract laborers” in some of the family enterprises (to the extent of six per unit), work on a piece-rate basis and are not aware of minimum wages. Less than 20 percent believes that their children will follow the same occupation. Most of the families are indebted. A combination of two or more systems of investment operates in most occupations: Products are either “their own” or of “traders who place work order” or in some cases, a cooperative society or a collective. Most of them sell their products on their own, both at home and also in nearby villages and in weekly markets. The annual household income varies from Rs5,000 to 60,000 per person, per annum based on the availability of work. On the basis of per capita income levels, more than 40 percent of the families falls below the poverty line. In most cases, the family economic conditions of these groups are deteriorating.

The general analysis indicates that despite providing livelihoods to the largest number of people next to agriculture for years, “traditional occupations” have faced several threats. Evidently, the government has not paid any attention to evolve a suitable policy to deal with the problems the caste occupations are facing from the point of view of the survival of these social groups. It has always looked to enhancing and tapping the potential of the export market. Their problems, covering vast areas and sectors, have remained unresolved over the years. These include limited access to credit, limited capital and low investment, limited resources for production, distribution and marketing, unstructured and individualized production systems, lack of adequate supply of raw materials, lack of latest technology, lack of new designs, lack of innovation and technology upgradation, lack of strong associations. A glaring omission is the failure of the government in mainstreaming these occupations in planning priorities and development policies. These factors inevitably have led to the deterioration and degradation of the caste/traditional occupations.

The emergence of factory-based, mechanized industries and proliferation of markets is a significant development in breaking the rigid association between caste and occupation. The trends of migration of artisans to outside professions and the adoption of new professions and their absorption into parallel trades within the economy, have gradually led to a centralized industrial system. Very few of those families that continue with their traditional occupations have made wealth. A vast majority is unable to save or to grow by reinvesting what they generate as surplus. They do not accumulate because of adverse terms and conditions in the marketplace. It is not just a matter of prices; they often face delays in payments for their products while being required to pay upfront for the inputs. Some enterprises, and their proportion is not known, are not independent units in the real sense but are in fact “disguised wage workers.” Others do not maximize profits, they toil to maximize the production (Harris-White 2014).

The trend of disassociation of occupation from caste is noticeable. The failure to earn a livelihood from traditional occupations resulted in a perceptible change in the occupational pattern. This pattern is being repeated in a more intense form in the present generation and is continuing from one generation to the other. However, the significant aspect of it is that a number of artisans continue to struggle in their traditional occupation to eke out their livelihood partly for want of better employment and partly on account of their attachment to the occupation. There has been apparently little mobility within an individual's lifetime whereas there is striking occupational mobility between one generation and the other. The father would not give up his occupation during his lifetime. But he does encourage his sons to opt for other sources of livelihood to supplement the income of the family. Such trends may also be found in most villages but unless a macro level study is attempted it is difficult to generalize the phenomenon.

Most of the aged respondents have continued to live in their own village. There has been little inter-village migration among these artisan families. However, the phenomenon of out-migration to towns and cities has been considerable over the years. The not-so-old and the young have either migrated or shifted to other occupations.

There is, however, a strong association between the mobility of caste and class. Those artisans who practice traditional caste occupations and are dependent entirely on their own traditional skills seek to migrate to other areas in search of livelihood either continuing in the same occupation or shifting to another. However, those artisans who own some assets (land, in most cases) stay on in their own occupation and develop their household industry (mostly weavers, blacksmiths and carpenters) while adopting certain modern skills. They combine business activities with their traditional occupation while keeping abreast of the changes in the design of their traditional products and modern processes. This is facilitated by fellow artisans, family members and visits to the nearest towns. Mass media is not a significant source of information for them. They, however, find it difficult to access economic support and technical assistance from government institutions.

Lack of education and modern skills is the single most significant feature of most of the artisans. The children of today are the first generation being sent to school in some cases. However, it is observed that there is a high rate of dropout which is indicative of the conflict between their desire to change their occupation and the economic crisis in which they are caught up. They maintain that they continue to be in these occupations not because of any special liking but because it is the only source of their livelihood. Given a chance, most of them, significantly the young and the middle aged, would like to acquire new skills and opt out from the present occupation.

Generally, artisans felt that they can improvise their occupations provided they have some capital for investment. The question of savings and generation of surplus does not arise in most of the families as managing the demands of basic needs itself is a problem. Their economic conditions have become worse over the years. There is a general fall in the incomes and standards of living. The situation among the out-migrant families, however, to some extent has been encouraging as some of them reported better conditions in the present than in the past. However, it has been generally found based on the available data that there has been a steady degradation or deterioration in their conditions.

The structure of enterprise of these artisan families is very simple and less diversified. The whole of the family or several of its members participate in the work and help in the production process. The investment is minimal and production tools in several cases are simple and inadequate. Borrowing "implements" on a rental basis is also in practice in some enterprises. The informal sources of capital and shortage of funds indicate their dependence on others even to produce what little they do.

In most cases, the small capital is obtained invariably from a moneylender or a contractor-businessmen or other agency which controls the marketing of the products produced by these artisan families. A mere 20 percent of families could manage to approach the bank or cooperative institutions or some other government agency for a loan. Several artisan families are still not aware of the credit flow from various agencies. Many others could not get a loan because of rigorous procedures, formalities, want of seed money (investment) or a guarantee for taking loan. Yet others found the atmosphere unfriendly, and officials not inclined to help them.

The increase in assets was clearly linked with the expansion in the capital formation, production and marketing. But there are a few instances where capital formation and higher production was rendered possible. Most of the artisans started with a small sum and were not able to expand the business. Several studies have revealed that lack of finance is the main factor inhibiting their scope for expansion of their activity. The other inhibiting factors include lack of raw material, lack of space or floor area, marketing difficulties, problems of competition, lack of demand for their products in the markets, etc. are the other factors responsible for their sad state of affairs. Although they desire to expand their base, they get hardly any assistance from the government. Even those interested in approaching governmental agencies for help are discouraged by the procedural issues relating to bank loans and government subsidies, both time-consuming and rigid, proving counterproductive in many situations.

### **The case of OBC artisan communities in pre-divided Andhra Pradesh**

The reports of the NSSO 64th Round Survey, the Multipurpose Household Survey (MPHS 2000), Sri Krishna Committee Report (2010–11) and the Telangana Samagra Kutumba Survey (2014) provide rich data about various social groups in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh states. For the purpose of analysis, the data presented here refer to mainly to the earlier undivided Andhra Pradesh.

Table 24.1 also indicates that there is variation in the formation of social groups between the three various regions. The upper castes constitute only 10.7 percent of the total population of the Telangana region, while in Andhra it is 28.4 percent. OBCs constitute 44.5 percent in the state of Andhra Pradesh while the Telangana holds 50.7 percent of the population. In Andhra, OBCs constitute 45.5 percent. Andhra Pradesh has very nearly the same distribution of SC population as the rest of the country in general and from within its various regions. However, the “minorities,” especially Muslims, constitute 12.4 percent in Telangana, while in Andhra, it is 9.2 percent. The tribal population in Telangana constitutes 8.9 percent, while in Andhra it is 6.6 percent. In the overall sense in Telangana state the OBCs, SCs, STs and minorities constitute slightly more than 89 percent, while in Andhra Pradesh it is 78 percent, while OBCs in the whole of undivided Andhra Pradesh constitute slightly more than 44.5 percent. This data clearly indicate that the upper castes or dominant castes constitute less than 11 percent in Telangana and only 22 percent in the whole of Andhra Pradesh. This makes it very clear that OBCs consisting of 140 different castes together with common interests and common problems constitute the single largest group of population. The social composition in terms of the mix of population affects the social character of the region and also has social and economic implications.

The government of the erstwhile undivided Andhra Pradesh divided the 144 BC (OBC) castes into five groups based on their traditional occupations. The List of Socially and Educationally Backward Classes of AP 1970 as amended from time to time, has divided the 144 OBC castes into five groups. The numbers are as follows: 54 castes in Group A, 28 castes in Group B, one caste in Group C, 47 castes in group D and 14 Muslim castes or communities in Group E.

Table 24.1 Distribution of Social Groups by State and Region (in Percentage)

S. no.	Caste	Region	
		Telangana	Andhra Pradesh
1.	OBCs	50.7	44.5
2.	SCs	15.8	16.2
3.	STs	8.9	6.6
4.	Muslim minorities	12.4	9.2
5.	Other minorities	1.5	1.7
6.	OCs (upper castes)	10.7	28.4
7.	Total	100	100

Source: Census 2001; NSSO 64th Round; Sri Krishna Committee Report, 2010

Note:

1. The figures are in percentages and may not add to 100 due to rounding. The OBC proportions were estimated using the NSSO survey data and the data were further supported by Panchayati Raj development survey census data, the proportion of high castes is arrived by deducting the proportions of the rest.
2. The BC population figures represent the population of only 93 castes which were grouped under the BC category at the time of the survey. However, 47 more castes were added to the list later which would mean the BC population would increase further in proportion to the population of new castes while the high caste population gets reduced by that extent.

**Group A** consists of Nomadic, Semi-Nomadic, De-notified Tribes and others. They carry on different tasks ranging from fishing, bamboo work, pig rearing, haircutting, washing clothes, entertaining, storytelling, playing musical instruments, snake charming and doing acrobatics including animal acrobatics, stone-cutting, hunting birds and animals, collecting and selling plants and flowers for medicines.

**Group B** includes a wide range of traditional occupations including weaving, painting, making toys, producing agricultural implements, cleaning grain and cotton, toddy tapping, oil extraction, pot-making, woodwork, metalwork including making gold ornaments and producing goods and utility products for the daily use of people.

**Group C** is converted Christians mainly carrying out the occupations they used to prior to their conversion to Christianity.

**Group D** occupations include agriculture, horticulture, cultivation, animal rearing, stitching clothes, gardening, petty trading, temple services, earth work, basket making, printing and pressing, drum beating, dance and music, singing, etc.

**Group E** mainly consists of BC Muslims who do all sorts of work including cleaning cotton, bed-making, playing in music bands, selling fruit, selling mutton, making and selling of aromatic substances, perfumes, etc. These details indicate that all the communities under different “legal groups” carry out one or other traditional productive works or extend services or entertain the people that are useful to the people in their daily life. All these occupations are hereditary in nature. These skills and creativity are reproduced by generation after generation.

Though a majority of these castes make a living in rural areas, the spatial distribution of OBC artisans significantly varies from region to region as some castes are confined to certain

areas and some are spread out. The spatial distribution of the various communities is given below.

1. Castes such as Yadava, Kuruma, Goud, Padmashali, Kapu, etc., are spread over the entire state with a large population present in several districts.
2. Castes such as Mudhiraj and Boya are confined to some districts with large concentration.
3. Castes such as Agnikula Kshatriya, Gangaputra, Bestha, etc., are concentrated along the coastlines, near rivers and large lakes.
4. Backward castes are spread over all towns and villages. At least one or two families to more of these castes like barbers, goldsmiths, ironsmiths, potters, etc., are found in all villages and towns of every district.
5. Backward castes with relatively large population such as the Rajaka or washing community are found in several districts of the state.
6. Nomadic, Semi-Nomadic and De-notified Tribes belonging to the OBC category are found in settlements in particular villages, towns and cities. They live outside the boundaries of the village and along the roadside in cities and eke out their livelihood by selling knick-knacks, performing arts, playing music, making animals perform, etc. Some of them are hunters of animals and birds and some live on begging as their caste is a “begging” caste.

The occupational groups within the OBC communities, as shown above, are involved in producing goods and services not only as individuals but many a time with the entire family as a unit, depending on the type of commodity they produce or the kind of service they extend to society or their clients. Thus, these caste groups continue to serve society and meet their and the needs of their families. These castes pass on the skills from one generation to the next. They use simple tools and acquire skills by observation and practice. They usually depend on the locally available raw material to produce the goods that are needed and demanded by the local people. Their market is mostly confined to the village or a particular locality in the town in which they live. Economically, they depend upon their traditional occupations, their physical labor and small and marginal landholdings if they own any.

Traditionally, there would be one or artisan two families in each occupation in each village to meet the demands of the people such as making agricultural implements or repairing them. These people own simple tools. In most cases, they create their own tools with their own innovation and creativity. But most of their work is done by hand. They work in their own dwelling areas by converting a part of the house into a “workshop.” They produce implements on the basis of orders they receive from time to time. These artisan groups also produce goods which they sell in local markets. The customary mode of payment was not only in cash but also in kind in many places and the families are guaranteed a share in the agricultural produce. Thus, society worked on a mutual benefit basis, sustaining each other with their talent, skills and importantly, their needs. Thus, the community was an integral part of the village economy, and this interdependence made the village a self-sufficient unit.

The inflow of industrial production and emergence of market forces resulted in a new kind of relationship both in the villages and towns. This phenomenon disturbed the prevalent communitarian life. Gradually, the services of these artisan families have come to be computed in terms of wage or a piece rate. In this process, the traditional arrangements became eroded resulting in the disintegration of the social structure. The artisan families were forced to migrate to other areas mainly due to lack of work. They were thus delinked from the communities they served and lived with while the family members are reduced to “nomadic sellers” selling their products and services, which were once valued and much needed. In the changed

circumstances, people started preferring industrial products rather than artisan products as they saw more advantages in the former. This resulted in a decrease in their income, resulting in further deterioration in their economic conditions. Considering they were not equipped with education or trained in alternative skills required by the modern economy, they found themselves “excluded” in market orientation. In these circumstances, they had to adopt one of the following courses:

1. Migrate to cities or towns and opt for jobs/work that had no connection with their previous occupation and skill.
2. Stay back in the village or town but seek alternative work, mostly physical labor, to make a livelihood.
3. Stay back in the village or town and continue with the traditional occupation despite the minimal income and hope for better days.

The nature of production activities and services led to cultural differentiation among them and stratification in the social hierarchy. In the past, there was no freedom for an individual to choose his/her occupation or livelihood according to his/her talent, choice or interest as they were bound by caste restrictions. When there was some freedom after independence, their occupations had lost their significance and value in terms of trade due to mechanization, technology, market competition and loss of identity and inter-community support. For instance, blacksmiths in general are found clinging to the same profession by joining the workshops in nearby cities as wage labor. Carpenters, however, are more mobile. On the other hand, a large number of weavers from the state during the last 100-odd years migrated to various cities in Gujarat and Maharashtra states and were absorbed into the textile industry as wage workers. Some moved to bigger villages or took to selling their goods door-to-door. A few families with a degree of economic viability turned into small businessmen and traders of manufactured goods. A large number of weavers are found selling manufactured cloth on a mobile basis or opening cloth shops in cities and towns. Only a small percentage of artisan families, mostly in their old age, tend to be in their traditional occupation. A large number of the traditional artisan workers are forced to join the ranks of agricultural laborers. All these developments indicate emerging social relations which eroded the socio-economic base of artisans who have lost their tools, traditional skills and independent life. For a majority of artisans, life is a struggle.

### **Changing contours**

The OBC communities, in most cases, continue to practice their own caste occupation until it fails to provide them with a livelihood. Hence, any discussion of OBCs would also mean a discussion about OBC artisans. We examine the status of the OBCs, their literacy and educational background, consumption, income pattern, to understand their socio-economic background. Using NSSO data, the progress of communities in the 25 years between 1983 and 2007/08 on four parameters—real monthly per capita consumption (MPCE, 2004–5 prices), youth literacy (ages 8–24), average years of educational attainment (ages 8–24) and poverty as the head count ratio of the population. The 1983 and 1999–2000 figures are based on large-sample NSSO surveys each containing about 8,500 households in AP; the 2007–8 survey, however, covered a smaller sample of about 3,500 households in AP. The results for the large-sample NSSO 2004–5 survey are not reported, but the results are consistent with the thin-sample NSSO survey of 2007–8. Poverty has been calculated according to the new Tendulkar poverty line, a line some 20 percent higher than the official poverty line.

Figures for OBCs are not available for any year prior to 1999–2000; such data were not available previously for OBCs. This always constitutes a major deficiency in the analysis of backwardness and formulating any development plan. Hence, all the data on rates of change for OBCs are for the shorter eight-year period 1999–2000 to 2007–8 and as such these data are not comparable with other rates of change which are for a longer 25-year period. Data for OBC communities were gathered by the NSSO only since the 1999–2000 survey year. The percentage change for OBCs in youth literacy in Telangana between 1999–2000 and 2007–8 at 29 percent was marginally lower than the state average of 31 percent. Among all social groups in Telangana, OBCs are, to some extent, above the SCs and STs and equal to Muslims, both in terms of consumption and poverty levels but far below the upper castes and the state average. In terms of consumption growth between 1999 and 2007, OBCs have a lower-than-average growth: 35 percent versus a state average of 41 percent. Agrarian distress and suicides became common amongst the OBCs, and the available data may not be able to explain the phenomenon properly.

### **Inequity in ownership of cultivable land**

The available data (which were collected during the years 1993–4 and 2004–5) throw light on the pattern of landholding by households across the regions of AP. The percentage of households not having landholdings has increased both in Telangana and Rayalaseema regions, whereas in the coastal Andhra region, it decreased. This is evident from a decline in Gini coefficients in coastal Andhra whereas there is a net increase in these coefficients in Telangana and Rayalaseema regions. Statistics indicate that more than about 80 percent of landholders with under five acres control 20 percent of total land whereas 6 percent of landholders control more than 30 percent of land; more than 70 percent of landholders with under five acres were held invariably by OBCs. In contrast more than 80 percent of landholdings above 25 acres has been invariably held by upper castes.

To sum up the above analysis, it may be said that since the state of Telangana has a higher proportion of “disadvantaged social groups” of SCs, STs, OBCs and minorities, it gives the state a social character that is different from that of other regions and states. It may be observed that the regional movement in Telangana was the direct result of such disparities that exist among social groups. The argument of the supporters of the movement was this distinctive social composition would enable them to escape upper-caste hegemony and create a more just society in which lower castes and minorities will have greater access to political power and economic benefits should they get their share at every level and in every sector. Echoing this logic, well known economist C. H. Hanumantha Rao says,

The weaker sections constituting a large majority of population in Telangana and, for that matter, in Andhra, would be better able to articulate their problems and politically assert themselves in separate, smaller and relatively homogenous states. The formation of Telangana state would thus strengthen the forces of social inclusion and secularism in both the states.

*(Sri Krishna Committee 2011)*

### **Income inequality**

Inequality measured in terms of the Gini coefficients (Table 24.2) reflects the state of cohesiveness in a particular group’s economic condition which can be compared across the social group

Table 24.2 Income Inequality (Gini Coefficient) by Rural Socio-Religious Category

State	Period	All	High-caste Hindus & non-Muslim minorities	SCs, STs & Muslims	Hindu OBCs
Andhra Pradesh	1993–4	0.42	0.47	0.34	0.37
	2004–5	0.44	0.48	0.39	0.40
	percent change	6	1	14	9
Telangana	1993–4	0.38	0.44	0.31	6.37
	2004–5	0.48	0.53	0.45	0.35
	percent change	25	21	43	-6
	1993–94	0.38	0.39	0.35	0.39

Source: Estimated from NCAER-Human Development Surveys, 1993–4 and 2004–5 quoted by the Sri Krishna Committee 2010

categorization. Three broad groups created are the “SCs, STs and Muslims,” “Hindu OBCs” and “High Castes and Other Minorities.” But the largest increase in Gini is found amongst the SCs, STs and Muslims in Telangana. In the case of coastal Andhra, the inequality has increased amongst the OBCs compared to the high castes whereas the poorer groups have not either improved or deteriorated in terms of the income level. Rayalaseema is a region where income inequality has increased amongst all communities, but the sharpest fall is amongst the poorer sections.

Tables 24.3, 24.4, 24.5, 24.6 present data relating to their (OBCs) work, sectors in which they work, their individual level work status, household source of income and consumption details and all the tables invariably point out the lower status of OBCs in relation to income and consumption of upper castes and greater physical work commitments in relation to all other groups.

### **Consumption expenditure differentials by population groups**

Consumption expenditure differential is a good indicator to highlight inequity in standards of living across social groups. The NSSO’s 64th Round data for the reference year 2007–8 is analyzed to estimate Monthly Per Capita Consumption Expenditures (MPCE) across regions and for various social groups identified using the caste and religion information. Overall, for United AP as a whole, the MPCE worked out to Rs.971 during 2007–8. The MPCE is rather low in Telangana at Rs895 compared with that of Coastal Andhra at Rs1,003 but higher than that of Rayalaseema which is low at Rs788.

A review of MPCE according to caste and religious category (Table 24.7) suggests that the STs have recorded lowest consumption expenditures amongst all the social groups and those living in Andhra Pradesh recorded the least at Rs680 while STs of Telangana are comparatively better at Rs734. SCs have the second lowest MPCE level in AP at Rs719 while those in Telangana recorded Rs734. The OBCs have middle level of consumption of Rs860 in AP and Rs889 in Telangana. The high castes have recorded high levels of expenditures at Rs1,846 in Telangana including Hyderabad, and Rs1,450 in Telangana excluding Hyderabad. AP reported upper castes expenditure at Rs1484. The Muslims in AP have levels a bit above the Hindus OBCs in AP with Rs892 and but slightly lower at Rs876 in Telangana. But they lag behind

Table 24.3 Formality of Work and Sectors (Pre-Divided Andhra Pradesh)

Social group	Urban			Rural			Total			
	Formal	Informal	Public sector	Ltd/Co-op.	Total	Formal	Private sector	Public sector	Ltd/Co-op.	Total
Muslims	4.2	14.9	6.1	9.5	12.5	4.5	5.9	5.8	5.1	6.1
OBCs	39.1	45.7	46.4	30.6	45	44.2	48.9	48	41.8	52.4
SCs/STs	15.8	14.6	14.4	21.2	12.2	14.8	28.7	28.5	32	22.5
High-caste Hindus	40.9	24.9	24.7	42	33.2	28.4	17.9	17.7	21.2	19
Total	100 (22.3)	100 (77.7)	100 (69.2)	100 (12.3)	100 (18.3)	100 (4.6)	100 (95.4)	100 (93.8)	100 (2.6)	100 (3.5)

*Status of backward-caste artisans in India*

Table 24.4 Individual Level Work Status (Pre-Divided Andhra Pradesh)

Rural AP: Usual principal activity prevalence distribution by social group (2009–10)

Social group	Self employed	Casual labor	Salaried	Un-paid	Renters	Study to disability	Not working due to disability	Domestic chores	Total
SCs	9.4	29.9	21.9	8.1	14.9	16.5	16.1	17.0	19.4
STs	7.0	7.5	3.5	11.3	3.2	5.4	6.9	4.4	6.8
OBCs	50.7	47.1	41.3	49.7	51.2	41.2	49.8	43.5	46.8
UCs	22.3	7.2	24.6	24.8	18.4	26.2	19.9	22.0	17.5
Muslims	8.4	4.8	4.2	5.7	9.4	7.4	4.6	9.7	6.6
Others	2.2	3.5	4.4	0.4	3.0	3.3	2.6	3.4	2.9
Total	16.8	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
									17.3

Table 24.5 Main Household Source of Income in the Combined State of Andhra Pradesh—2009–10 ( Distribution within Each Source of Income by Social Groups)

Rural AP: Usual principal activity prevalence distribution by social group (2009–10)							
Social group	Self employed	Casual labor	Salaried	Renters	Un-paid	Study due to disability	Domestic chores
SCs	8.8	23.6	11.9	7.1	8.2	10.3	9.6
STs	1.2	4.9	1.2	1.1	1.6	1.3	0.7
OBCs	43.7	47.6	41.8	37.1	53.8	39.8	46.7
UCs	24.8	7.6	30.6	41.2	27.5	31.0	23.4
Muslims	18.5	12.1	9.6	10.0	7.6	13.6	17.3
Others	3.1	4.1	5.0	3.6	1.4	4.0	2.4
Total	14.2	8.9	21.9	4.1	3.1	12.8	5.0

URBAN							
Social group	Self emp. (agri.)	Agri. labor	Self emp. (non-agri.)	Other labor	Others (salaried, etc.)	Total	Social group
							Self emp.
SCs	8.2	29.3	12.6	24.8	19.4	20.5	SCs
STs	11.4	7.9	1.1	4.0	2.2	6.2	STs
OBCs	48.9	48.0	52.6	48.8	38.4	47.5	OBCs
Upper castes	28.5	8.8	17.6	6.9	31.7	17.4	Upper castes
Muslims	2.9	2.5	12.8	11.5	5.3	5.6	Muslims
Others	0.1	3.6	3.3	4.0	3.0	2.8	Others
Total	20.1	37.6	14.9	12.0	15.4	100	Total

Table 24.6 SRCs by Consumption Deciles (Pre-Divided Andhra Pradesh)

Distribution by consumption deciles										Total	
Social group	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Total
SCs	8.9	12.1	9.0	12.4	16.3	10.5	9.9	10.4	5.4	5.1	100
STs	24.4	12.1	13.1	9.9	16.8	10.7	4.4	3.8	3.4	1.5	100
OBCs	7.9	10.3	9.5	10.6	10.7	11.3	11.6	11.6	9.4	7.1	100
Muslims	5.0	7.3	10.4	12.3	8.4	12.5	14.1	11.2	11.4	7.4	100
Other minorities	4.7	2.7	13.8	4.7	13.1	7.1	17.6	13.4	7.5	15.5	100
Upper caste	0.7	1.8	5.3	6.7	6.7	10.1	11.2	14.2	15.1	28.3	100
Total	7.3	8.6	9.0	10.1	11.1	10.9	11.2	11.5	9.5	10.8	100
Distribution within consumption class (prevalence) (pre-divided Andhra Pradesh)											
Social Group	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Total
SCs	21.8	24.9	17.6	21.7	25.9	17.2	15.7	16.1	10.0	8.5	17.7
STs	18.2	7.6	7.8	5.3	8.2	5.3	2.1	1.8	1.9	0.7	5.4
OBCs	50.1	54.9	48.2	48.0	44.1	47.4	47.1	46.3	45.0	30.3	45.8
Muslims	6.2	7.7	10.4	11.1	6.8	10.4	11.4	8.8	10.8	6.2	9.0
Other minorities	2.0	1.0	4.8	1.4	3.7	2.0	4.9	3.6	2.4	4.5	3.1
Upper caste	1.8	4.0	11.2	12.5	11.4	17.7	18.9	23.5	30.0	49.8	19.0
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

*Table 24.7 Monthly Per Capita Consumption Expenditure (Rs) Regions and Social Groups (2007–8)*

<i>Region/group</i>	<i>All groups</i>	<i>SCs</i>	<i>STs</i>	<i>OBCs</i>	<i>Other Hindus</i>	<i>Other minorities</i>	<i>Muslims</i>
Andhra Pradesh	971	719	680	860	1484	969	892
Telangana	1025	734	734	889	1846	1101	876

Source: Estimates from NSSO's 64th Round Survey, 2007–8. Note: Hyderabad excluded due to small sample size

other minorities in both the states, with other minorities reporting Rs969 in AP and Rs1,101 in Telangana. Region-wise, generally speaking, the consumption levels are lower in Rayalaseema in all categories of people while the levels between coastal Andhra and Telangana are not very different (Sri Krishna Committee).

The National Council for Applied and Economic Research (1993–4 and 2004–5) (NCAER) has undertaken two human development surveys about a decade apart; the first one in 1993–4 and the second in 2004–5. The results of an elaborate exercise using multiple variables to compute and compare the change in human development by regions indicate revealing facts.

The concept of human development is expanded so as to include infrastructure variables as well, and thus, one can compare deprivation in human development (including access to infrastructure) across the regions. There are variations between regions in such deprivations which are the components of human development. An analysis of these facts indicates that OBCs were most effected (as in the case of SCs and STs) and they stand much below the state average and national averages. The results corroborate with other studies conducted in different states (Sri Krishna Committee).

These contrasting dimensions of income change suggest that the relatively poorer are not able to mobilize themselves to demand better opportunities for their economic living. On the other hand, the relatively richer who invariably belong to upper caste sections, have a firm standing and are reaping the fruits of economic vibrancy as well as through traditionally feudal forms of ownership. Also, the relatively better off are able to access the benefits from government programs and schemes of affirmative action. This income differentiation is reinforced by analysis of income change according to occupation. The upper caste rich farmers in all regions have shown improvement in a majority of cases, or their incomes remained stable or income gain has hardly changed. However, the real income of the agricultural wage labor has declined considerably in Telangana, whereas it has increased considerably in the coastal Andhra region. Another dimension in which the above trend is corroborated is in income change by caste. It is clear that the OBCs, SCs, STs and minorities have suffered a decline in income.

All the above analysis suggests that, so far as the income change dynamics is concerned, one may generally find a more equitable distribution of income among the upper castes whereas the deprived, the wage laborers, and the SCs/STs/minorities have gained little income during the decades of the 1990s and 2000s and these communities were not able to improve their household income and living conditions. This analysis provides credence to the fact that most of the deprived communities are facing hardship and, therefore, are vulnerable to mass mobilization on one pretext or another, including political mobilization with promises which may or may not be met. It has been generally said that the Naxalite movement and the recent Telangana movement for separate statehood are the net results of such a phenomenon.

The analysis also indicates that at least some of the occupations and their primary cooperative societies provided a source of livelihood for people who used to depend on them in terms

of income generation and socio-economic consolidation and prevented them from becoming either agricultural or migrant labor. When these societies were strong, the government extended financial support. Once the privatization process started, all the subsidies and concessions extended to these societies were stopped. With the withdrawal of financial support by the state to these societies, their existence has become precarious. Thus, the occupational cooperatives are found either disappearing or rapidly becoming defunct. Due to this, the people who depended upon the traditional occupations are forced to seek an alternative strategy for survival. They are mainly found over the years joining the labor force. Therefore, in the 1990s, the percentage of labor increased. One study revealed that the increase in labor population is more than the population growth rate as has been observed due to the influx of communities that have lost their traditional occupation in the agriculture sector.

Apart from the commodity producing artisan castes and service castes, several OBCs also depend on agriculture as their source of livelihood with or without owning any land of their own. A look at the recent available data brings out these facts further quite clearly. It may be seen that about three-fourths of the OBCs still lives in rural areas, where the main source of livelihood of the majority of OBCs is either farming, farm-based activity or wage labor or some kind of non-farm activity. In 2000, only 16 percent of all BC households cultivated land as owner-cultivator as against 41 percent among upper-caste households. Only 12 percent carried out some kind of business which indicates their reduced access to capital. Taking both farm and non-farm activities, only about 28 percent of rural households had got some access to capital assets as compared to 56 percent for upper caste households. Inadequate access to agricultural land and capital leaves no option to BC workers (occupational groups) except to resort to manual wage labor; consequently, it leads to enormously high levels of (manual) wage labor among the OBCs, i.e., 61 percent as compared to only one-tenth for upper castes in rural areas. Among them, in urban areas, one-third is casual laborers as against only 3 percent among the upper castes. The unemployment rate (based on current daily status) in 2000 was two times higher among the OBCs (15.5 percent) compared with other castes.

With a higher incidence of migration, change of occupation, wage labor, associated with a high rate of underemployment, the OBC entrepreneurs tend to suffer from low income and a greater level of loss of income and acute poverty. In 2000, about 38 percent of OBC households were found below the poverty line in rural areas compared to only less than 20 percent among other caste households. The incidence of poverty was as high as 50 percent among agricultural labor against 40 percent among non-agricultural labor. OBCs are also far behind in education in comparison to upper castes.

In post-independence India, the state had been intervening in the development process through planning and resource allocation to different sectors, areas and groups. The OBC artisans have been gradually isolated from the ongoing development process. It appears that the handicrafts or traditional occupations were not given due attention and largely remained outside the ambit of the government programs.

The chronicle of development in the state of Andhra Pradesh can be divided broadly into five different phases. During the *first phase* (1950 to 1969) the key elements were “institutional changes” (abolition of the Zamindari system and tenancy reform) and creation and strengthening of democratic institutions i.e., Panchayati raj institutions at the grassroots level for mobilization of people to participate in the development programs.

The *second phase* (1970 to 1980) covers the spread of the “green revolution,” increased priority to physical infrastructure, particularly, irrigation and power and the beginning of specific strategies for alleviation of poverty.

The *third phase* (1980 to 1990) saw a drastic change of priorities in favor of “welfare schemes,” both centrally sponsored schemes and the schemes launched by the state government with a view to creating durable physical infrastructure particularly in the backward areas and improve the socio-economic conditions of the poor. Efforts were also made to strengthen the Primary Agricultural Credit Society in 1987, to streamline the credit system through the “single window system” and also set up “Karshak Parishads” institutions to decide the cropping pattern, availability of input services and ensure remunerative prices to the farmers.

In the *fourth phase* (1990 to 1998) the state started withdrawing its socio-economic responsibilities and assigning them to Self-Help Groups (SHGs). Along with these measures, based on the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992, the state government amended the Panchayati Raj Act in 1994 and reserved seats at various levels to OBCs. At present, these institutions are governed by Andhra Pradesh Panchayati Raj Act, 1994 which provides constitutional status to these institutions.

The *fifth phase* (1998 onwards), relates to the second stage of economic reforms and the application of information technology for good governance and to stimulate economic growth in the state (Balaramulu 2004).

Analysis of the implementation of the above programs indicates unimpressive performance and lack of prioritization and field relations. The main lacuna of all the strategies of development, however, was its failure to orient itself towards, people-centered programs. Most programs concentrated around the area development or infrastructural development or so-called poverty alleviation and most of them had “rehabilitary” impact. However, since the proponents of development lacked commitment and often were deviant, the “target groups” did not benefit. In fact, the indifferent implementation of the programs resulted in further widening the gap between upper caste/class groups and lower caste/class communities.

One of the major schemes introduced by the government of Andhra Pradesh was the “Aadarana Project” which aimed at providing modern hand tools to the artisans with a view to improving their productivity, minimizing human drudgery, improving product/service quality and helping modernize process operators. It was proposed to cover 10 lakh artisans over a period of two years (1999–2000) with an aim at increasing income levels resulting in improved standards of living. The scheme could not be continued for long in its original form. There was a general criticism that it failed to achieve its objectives (Centre for Industrial Development 1999).

The existence of a multiplicity of agencies which were created to help the artisans, failed to fulfill the tasks. Lack of awareness of the agencies and also on the part of the artisans, led to the failure of the very purpose for which these organizations are created. The rigid rules, complex procedures, lack of coordination and delay in granting loans and subsidies all contributed to their failure. Besides due to the complexity of procedures and rules, middlemen emerged, depriving the beneficiaries of the full benefits. Besides, liberalization resulted in monopolization of markets and entry of financial capital, while the growth of the engineering industry and machine parts hastened the process of displacement of artisans from their traditional occupations.

The analysis further indicates that the state initially found sponsoring and undertaking various development programs at the grassroots level, gradually adopting various strategies moving from the “left to center and then taking a great U turn towards the right” to introduce economic reforms, structural adjustment and liberalization, privatization and globalization policies. The “development strategies” in the overall sense had not been “people-centered” in their approach but mainly based on area development, infrastructural development, spread of markets and withdrawal of state intervention in development. In the whole process however due to certain constitutional guarantees SCs and STs could find at least some space in development with necessary budgetary allocations, but OBCs were wholly left out “untouched in the inclusion process”

thereby completely marginalized. The “marginal share” the OBCs secured in the budget allocations and other developmental programs hardly made any impact.

Apart from the National Backward Classes Finance Corporation, the AP government set up as many as 17 more Corporations/Federations for the benefit of BC artisans and service castes. Apart from the AP Backward Classes Cooperative Finance Corporation, a separate cooperative federation was set up for each of the following 17 castes: Chakali, Nayee Brahmin, Vaddara, Sagara, Boya Valmiki, Poosala, Krishna Balija, Bhallaraju, Padmeshali, Yadava, Bestha, Vishwa Brahmana (includes blacksmith, goldsmith, carpenter, brass-smith), Medara, Shalivahana, Darji and Toddy Tappers. These federations were constituted to extend exclusive support to the artisan communities in the form of loans, subsidies, margin money, etc. However, they remained almost dormant as no concrete steps were taken to regulate their functioning nor were any proper budgetary allocations made; the federations remained ornamental.

As far as the artisans were concerned, this was one of the major policy initiatives taken by the government. In the beginning, steps were taken to set up occupational cooperatives and extend benefits to its members at the village level. These societies’ aims were to prevent artisans from migrating, strengthen their source of livelihood, provide accessibility to the market and finally lead to the formation of financial capital and provide economic stability. A large number of occupational cooperative societies were set up for weavers, fisherman, toddy tappers, dairy farmers, bamboo workers, washer people, etc. At the state level in some cases apex bodies, cooperative federations or corporations were set up. However, these organizations too were neglected as they were not allotted budgets required to carry out their programs, hence their performance was totally unimpressive (see Table 24.1 for more details).

The report of the Committee on Conditions of Work and Promotion of Livelihood in the Unorganized Sector by Arjun K. Sengupta, et al. and the report of the National Commission of Enterprises in the Unorganized Sectors, (August 2007) revealed that a large majority of the artisan communities and OBCs continue to be poor, unemployed, overworked, under-paid, working in unhealthy conditions, constantly facing insecurity in employment, separated from families and living in alien surroundings. The recommendations made by the Sengupta Committee are pending although the Planning Commission too said that they needed to be implemented.

The above analysis indicates that although the government initiated various development programs, they hardly reached OBCs. Except a provision for scholarships, hostels and increasing the infrastructural facilities for their educational development, the other programs meant for OBCs were highly limited, piecemeal, marginal and rehabilitatory in nature. There was no long-term program for the development of OBCs and the budgetary allotments were always meager. Central assistance was also very much limited, and states failed to initiate independent programs. The net result was lack of development, rising and disguised unemployment and exploitation of the worst kind.

Lack of clear-cut public policy and proper planning on the part of government and other agencies responsible have resulted in strengthening the forces of exploitation and further distancing of the artisans from their traditional occupations and paved the way for the ultimate extinction of traditional skills.

Based on the analysis it may be summed up that over the years there has been little change in the lives of backward classes, especially during the last two decades. Successive governments could not implement the policies and programs meant for backward castes effectively due to their failure to keep up their constitutional obligation. Lack of political will and commitment towards the programs may be the main reason for the bad state of affairs. Monopolization of politics by upper castes and their political hegemonization may be the other reasons.

The above analysis may indicate the need to initiate certain measures for providing proper assistance and strengthening the small economy: *One*, evolving a suitable public policy with a view to making best use of the existing traditional but skilled manpower available at the village level. This requires regulating big industry and the market while ensuring monopoly-rights to these artisans in their respective fields. *Two*, evolving a separate subplan for OBC artisans is the need of the hour especially for a focused and programmed development. *Three*, the creation of integrated machinery at the block or Mandal and town/city level to look after all matters relating to rural artisans, starting from identification of artisans to guaranteeing incomes. Maintaining a “Reserve Fund” under its control at each level would provide autonomy and help the agency to discharge its functions effectively. Establishing a branch office for a cluster of villages to ensure continuous monitoring of the programs may further improve the situation. Creating a “single window” for all works needed by artisans will further help. *Four*, providing assistance at various levels, imparting technical skills, offering technical training in designing, maintaining product efficiency and other help needed, and developing appropriate technology would further strengthen the “Small Economy.” Assistance is needed in the areas such as identification of artisans, enrolment, imparting modern skills, use of improved tools and their supply, providing capital and capital goods, arranging for raw material supplies, importing technical help if any, and furnishing market facilities. *Lastly*, encouraging the establishment of “Peoples Cooperatives” at all levels and in every traditional occupation would help extend support to each and every occupation. This would strengthen the organizations of artisans who can tackle their problems individually as well as on a cooperative basis. Creating special economic zones (SEZs) exclusively meant for traditional artisans will go a long way to strengthen their economy.

If the above suggestions are converted into policy initiatives, they may go a long way to focus special attention on these artisan groups and redress their grievance to some extent. This is minimum and urgently requires otherwise the very purpose of introducing protective discriminatory policies by government have no meaning. The Muralidhar Rao Commission has aptly said,

The Constitution of India has provided for certain remedial measures to see that those who are socially backward can improve their lot and enjoy the fruits of freedom in the same manner as those who are forward either by accident of birth or other circumstances. If a section of the society progresses at the expense of the rest, it will not be conducive to social peace and stability. Political freedom will have no meaning unless the citizens have also an equal share in the economic progress.

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# OBC WOMEN IN NIZAMABAD, TELANGANA

**Entrenched inequality, a narrative of four castes**

*Akhileshwari Ramagoud*

## **Gender inequality: A global overview**

Gender equality is pivotal to balanced and just human progress and sustainable development. It will empower not just women to overcome poverty and social inequity but also their children, families, communities and countries. Without gender equality, there cannot be a world of equity, justice and shared responsibility.

Gender equality produces what UNICEF calls, a double dividend: It benefits both women and children. It produces healthy, confident and educated daughters and sons as studies have shown that women-influenced or women-determined decisions in the household positively impact the nutrition, health care and education of the children. The benefits of gender equality go beyond their direct impact on children; they impact the entire world.

Yet, despite substantial gains in women's empowerment since the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1979, gender discrimination remains pervasive in every region of the world. It manifests in the preference for sons over daughters resulting in feticide, infanticide, denial of education and a career for girls and women and gender-based violence in the forms of physical, sexual, emotional and mental violence. There are several less-overt forms of gender discrimination that are equally destructive. While institutional discrimination is difficult to identify and fight, cultural traditions perpetuate social exclusion and injustice to women from generation to generation as gender stereotypes are internalized and considered "natural" and go unchallenged.

Eliminating gender discrimination and empowering women requires a greater role for women as decision-makers in three areas that shape their lives and of children. These areas are i) the household, ii) the workplace and, iii) the political sphere. A change for the better in any one of these realms makes a difference to women's equality in the others.

The one unquestionable fact is that gender discrimination is all-pervasive. While the degrees and forms of inequality may vary, women and girls are deprived of equal access to resources, opportunities and political power in every region of the world. The oppression of girls and women includes the preference for sons over daughters, limited personal and professional choices for girls and women, the denial of basic human rights and outright gender-based violence.

Despite overall growth in educational enrollment, the number of out-of-school children in the age group of 5–17 years is 8.4 crores, according to the 2011 census. With few exceptions, girls are more likely than boys to be missing from classrooms across the developing world. Girls who do enroll in school often drop out when they reach puberty for many reasons such as the demands of household responsibilities, a lack of sanitation facilities in school, a lack of female role models, child marriage or sexual harassment and violence (UNICEF 2007).

Nearly 40 percent of adolescent girls aged 15–18 years do not have access to any kind of schooling. About 30 percent of girls from the poorest families have never set foot inside a classroom. Girls are twice as likely as boys to have less than four years of schooling, according to the Right to Education Forum (Anon 2019).

Several studies have shown that the proportion of out-of-school children was higher in rural areas than in urban areas. Also, in rural areas, the proportion of out-of-school girls was higher than that of boys. In terms of caste, the proportion of children from Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) was highest followed by Other Backward Class (OBC) children (Dubey 2018).

### **Gender equality in India**

Gender equality is an idea that even in the 21st century is embodied more in laws in India than in reality. Equality is a fundamental right of every Indian citizen. Yet for women, inequity is inbuilt in almost every aspect of life including literacy, employment, wages, salary, access to healthcare, access to food, access to political power and property ownership. Despite the constitution and the law of the land which have given equal rights to women in all domains, in practice, women's rights are limited.

The freedom struggle and the political awakening in men and women regarding women's rights laid the ground for the mushrooming of small and big movements in independent India. The 1970s saw the beginning of a highly organized women's movement in India inspired by the feminist movement elsewhere in the world. Violence against women was one of the main focuses of the movement. 1974 was a pivotal year for the women's movement in India. It was the year that the official report on the status of women, *Towards Equality* (Government of India 1974) was published. The report was an exhaustive account of the status of women in different socio-economic sectors and the issues were debated in across the country and mainstreamed the movement.

Another report, “An Indian Personality for Television: Report of the Working Group on Software for Doordarshan,” (Joshi 1985) had a chapter entitled “Women, the Neglected Half” in which the report set out the agenda for women and the nation. To quote:

If our nation is to rise, how can it do so if half the nation, if our woman-kind, lag behind and remain ignorant and uneducated? Our civilization, our customs, our laws, have all been made by man and he has taken good care to keep himself in a superior position and treat woman as a chattel and a play-thing to be exploited for his own advantage and amusement. Under this continuous pressure, woman has been unable to grow and to develop her capacities to her fullest, and then man has blamed her for her backwardness ... The women of India have to free themselves from the tyranny of man-made customs and laws. They will have to carry on this second struggle (along with their participation in the first struggle for freedom) by themselves, for man is not likely to help them.

### **Telling statistics of women's status in India**

- India figures in the medium human development category—and is ranked at 129 out of 189 countries and territories, according to the UN Human Development Report, 2020 (Human Development Report 2019).
- According to the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index, 2020, India is behind Bangladesh, Nepal and China in the South Asia region. Only Pakistan fares worse than India. While India is ranked at 112, Bangladesh is at 50, Nepal at 101, Sri Lanka at 102, China at 106 and Pakistan at 151 (Global Gender Gap Report 2020).
- Economic opportunities for women are extremely limited in India (35.4 percent). It figures at the bottom along with Pakistan (32.7 percent), Yemen (27.3 percent), Syria (24.9 percent) and Iraq (22.7 percent) (Business Today 2019).
- In terms of women's health and survival and economic participation, India is ranked in the bottom five according to the Global Gender Gap Report (2020, 186).
- India occupies the worst position in four areas, according to the Global Gender Gap report: i) right to hold a bank account and get credit; ii) inheritance rights for daughters; iii) women's access to land use, control and ownership and iv) women's access to non-land assets use, control and ownership (Anon 2018).
- In India, nearly half of the women do not have a bank account for their own use, and 60 percent of women have no valuable assets to their name, according to the UN. Women often lack collateral for bank loans due to low levels of property ownership (Talukdar 2013).
- Women have equal rights under the law to own property and receive equal inheritance rights, but in practice, women are deprived of these rights considering that as many as 70 percent of rural land is owned by men (Census 2011).
- According to the Census of India 2011, women lag far behind men in literacy with a mere 65.46 percent of women being literate as against 82.14 percent of men (The Hindu 2020).
- The Maternal Mortality Ratio (MMR) in India has declined to 113 in 2016–18, which is a steady decrease from 122 in 2015–17, and 130 in 2014–16 (Upadhyay 2014).

### **Status of women of the OBCs**

The gender gap among the OBCs is enormous with the OBC women lagging behind men in every social and economic indicator such as income, literacy, health, nutrition, ownership of land/property, life expectancy. Women from lower castes (the SCs, OBCs, and tribal communities) are particularly vulnerable to maternal mortality and infant mortality. They are often unable to access health and educational services, lack decision-making power, and face higher levels of violence (Ministry of Women & Child Development 2015).

The Maternal Mortality Rate and Infant Mortality Rate is higher than the all-India level among the lower caste and OBC women. Besides, an epidemic of violence prevails among the OBC women; they face domestic violence, sexual exploitation and are the largest number of women trafficked into the sex trade along with women of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

OBC women and girls not only suffer from the general discrimination and deprivation that characterizes Indian women, but the very fact that they belong to excluded communities, makes them more vulnerable. Their situation is made far more tenuous than that of women of other castes as they face multiple disadvantages. The gender gap needs to be narrowed through a process of economic, social, political and legal interventions for women and girls from the OBCs (Ministry of Women & Child Development 2016).

The Government of India has over the years taken several steps to bridge the gap between the oppressed sections of society and the rest of the population including providing reservations in educational institutions and government employment. Scholarship schemes enabled many students from these communities to continue their education. Yet it has not greatly improved the enrollment ratios or reduced the drop rates especially for girl children among these oppressed peoples.

Women struggle with a variety of deprivations that make them vulnerable differently and at different levels. Among the disadvantaged groups, the women are doubly marginalized, first being women and second belonging to a disadvantaged community.

It is well-known that the struggle of women starts right from her birth or even before her birth and continues until her last breath. A woman/girl faces discrimination at birth (female feticide issues), discrimination in nourishment, discrimination in education, discrimination in access to health, access to resources, denied property rights, lack of role in decision making, no legal rights and extremely limited job opportunities. Moreover, apart from discrimination in these basic services, the women are also faced with atrocities, rape, trafficking, domestic violence, violence in society, and so on.

The other side of the problem lies in women's own inability and perhaps lack of will to demand their rights and to assert themselves mainly because they have to deal with issues of survival. Most women face some or all of the following problems:

- Being caught up in daily struggles for fuel, fodder, and wages they have no time for anything else.
- The clearly marked out and strictly implemented compartmentalized social roles for women and norms of interaction leave little room for the non-traditional concept of studying and thinking for oneself.
- The women are not able to tap their collective strength as they go about their lives bound by social norms that isolate them or shame them and make them hesitant to share their experiences of oppression and violence.
- They do not or are not allowed to participate in decision-making processes or allowed to access information either domestically or in the public sphere. Even in relation to government schemes, they do so as passive recipients.
- Conditioned literally from birth into believing to being unwanted, unimportant, of being a lesser person being a female, traumatized by the violence and discrimination they face, the women are shorn of all confidence and self-esteem and tend to view their environment with fear and suspicion and live in insecurity.
- They are systematically robbed of their self-esteem, ability to think, confidence to take decisions and act despite fear of failure.
- The result is that they are paralyzed by their own fears of worthlessness. Thus, women find it difficult to break the vicious, self-perpetuating cycle of illiteracy, lack of assertion, low self-image, zero self-confidence. They cannot discover their innate talents, build on their thinking capacities, and carve out and build their own future. Thus, the stereotype that women are inferior, second class citizens, irrelevant to society except to serve the man and to bear children to perpetuate the family lineage gets accepted as fact and is imbibed unconsciously and is perpetuated by every generation.

### **Area of study**

The district of Nizamabad in the undivided Andhra Pradesh was chosen to conduct the study. The study was carried out before the state of Telangana was created in 2014. Nizamabad district

was chosen as it was one of the few districts of the then undivided Andhra Pradesh state that has a high population of women. It had a better sex ratio for the population with 1,040 women to 1,000 men. According to the Census 2011, the national sex ratio in India is 940 (Census Organisation of India 2011). The district capital city, Nizamabad is one of the fast-developing cities in Telangana. However, Nizamabad district is one of the three districts at the bottom of the Human Development Index, according to the first-ever Human Development Report of the Telangana State (Centre for Economic and Social Studies and Department of Planning 2017). Human development is the expansion of people's freedom to live long, healthy and creative lives. The construction of the Human Development Index combines three dimensions of development—viz., (i) per capita income, (ii) longevity and health standards, (iii) literacy and education. The pioneering report by the Department of Planning of the Telangana government and the Centre for Economic and Social Studies, Hyderabad, computed the Human Development Index (HDI) indices for the ten districts of Telangana for the years 2004–5 and 2011–12 and projected the same for the year 2015–16. In both the years, Nizamabad, Medak and Mahabubnagar ranked at the bottom in the two periods (Human Development Report 2019, 73).

The initial survey by the researchers showed that Nizamabad city had grown into a “medical city” with a large number of hospitals which had proved to be a boon to the Rajaka community or the washer people or Chakali caste. Similarly, the Nayi Brahmin or Mangali caste, the traditional barber community was present in a large number in the city. The Kuruma community, one of the two shepherd communities of Golla and Kuruma, had a strong presence with several of its men in public service and politics. The Goud community is one of the fast-developing communities, both economically and politically. The Nizamabad parliamentary constituency elected two men from the Goud community to the parliament, T. Bala Goud in 1984 and Madhu Yashki Goud in 2004. Both men represented the constituency for two terms each. In terms of backwardness, while the Chakali and Mangali are categorized as “A,” that is the more backward among the backward castes, the Golla-Kuruma and Goud communities are categorized as “B” that is, in terms of backwardness, they are better placed than those castes in the “A” category (Government of Andhra Pradesh 1993).

### **Profile of four castes: Nayi Brahmin, Rajaka, Kuruma and Goud**

First, we will discuss the Nayi Brahmin community and hear the voices of the women. The term “Nayi Brahmin” has been adopted by the Mangali or barber community lately, in line with the thinking of the backward castes to give up their traditional caste names, as most often they have become terms of abuse and indicate lowliness. We will then take up the Rajaka women (“Rajaka” is the modern name for washer people or Dhobi caste) followed by Kuruma women, and lastly, by women of the Goud caste. The Kuruma and Golla communities, are two subcastes of pastoral communities. They are goatherds/shepherds and cattle-herders, respectively, who now prefer to call themselves “Yadava.” Community leaders of all the four communities, all invariably male, were met with and interviewed, as representatives of the community, to get an overall picture of the status of the community and its women.

The two castes of Nayi Brahmin and Rajaka are supposed to keep society and its people clean through their services. Their place in the caste hierarchy is among the lowest. Today, in modern times, their place is no better in terms of socio-economic conditions. They remain at the lowest rungs due to the stranglehold of the low caste status that has prevented them from modernizing. They have little education; they lead a hand-to-mouth existence since their traditional occupations no longer give them a sustainable livelihood as they are low paid. Their caste occupations like shaving/hair-cutting and washing clothes do not give them either social respect or financial

stability. Modernization of these activities has not resulted in any gains to the community as they do not have the wherewithal to make gains from the modernization and mechanization that have been introduced into the professions since they have no resources, either financial or human, to capitalize on it. For instance, personal grooming, hair styling, for both men and women have boomed as businesses but the community has no wherewithal to invest in it. With the Rajaka community, going in for automation of washing, drying and ironing with electric irons are inconceivable due to their poor economic status. As a result, the communities are floundering.

In the case of the two other castes, Kuruma and Goud, modernization and urbanization have made inroads into their caste occupations. While the Kuruma people in Nizamabad city have long given up the caste profession as shepherds, the Goud community has moved out of toddy tapping and selling. The women-specific jobs in these two communities have therefore disappeared. Instead, the women moved to another area to earn a livelihood, that of beedi-rolling, beedi being the poor man's cigarette. The work of beedi-rolling has become a "caste" occupation, a lifeline for women of all lower castes. However, even this has become endangered and has become less paying as the industry is in the doldrums for various reasons. From about six lakhs women beedi rollers in the undivided Andhra Pradesh in 1997 accounting for 13.75 percent of the women beedi rollers in India, the number fell by half in 2010, to 3,65,208 (7.32 percent) (Mazumdar 2018).

If, overall, the communities have remained backward both socially and economically, then the situation of the women of these communities is worse in every social and economic indicator.

### **Profile of the Nayi Brahmin community**

The population of Nayi Brahmin or Mangali population is around 3.8 percent of the former undivided Andhra Pradesh state, almost evenly spread across all regions and districts. They are several subcastes among Mangali such as Konda Mangali, Siri Mangali, Kapu Mangali and Telaga and Balija Mangali. While earlier, intermarriage between the subcastes was not allowed, now these borders have disappeared and there is inter-marriage between the subcastes. Apart from the traditional shaving of beard and body hair and cutting hair, the Nayi Brahmin people also doubled as givers of traditional minor medical treatments, extracting teeth, setting sprains right, surgically removing corns and other such growths on the body. They also performed duties in connection with marriage, matchmaking and celebrations. Music is a subsidiary occupation of this caste, and it is passed down from generation to generation. Nayi Brahmin women are midwives and are called upon to bathe to newborn babies and post-menstrual girls, jobs that are considered unclean.

There are three types of Nayi Brahmin people:

- a. Nadabrahmin who play musical instruments.
- b. Dhanvantrivarasulu who are doctors treating diseases with traditional medicines.
- c. Mangali who do shuddhi seva, that is maintain physical cleanliness of society.

There are two subcastes in the community: Konda Mangali who shave heads for pilgrims in places of pilgrimage who offer their hair in sacrifice or renunciation and Sri Mangali who do the service (seva) of cleaning up (shuddhi) in habitations/society.

### **Voices of community leaders of Nayi Brahmin**

The Nayi Brahmin community is among the most backward of the backward communities, both culturally and economically. Since there is little awareness in the community there have

been no community-supported student hostels to spread education among the youth. Several other communities have helped their community people to get educated by providing free or subsidized residential facilities in cities and towns. There has been no such initiative in the Nayi Brahmin community. To set right this lack of awareness, some community leaders have taken up an initiative for the women and young girls with the support of the Arya Samaj to conduct awareness programs. The Nayi Brahmin Jagruti Vedika has taken up the task of conducting yagnas and classes for women to inculcate “good thinking” so that they can change themselves and their families. Asked why the Vedika does not focus on the men, the leaders dismissed them as “vyasana parulu,” as good for nothing men given to bad habits. According to a community leader, 70 percent of the men in the community are addicted to alcohol because they earn daily and tend to spend the cash in hand on their indulgences, forcing women of the community to take to beedi-rolling to support the family.

The Nayi Brahmin community leaders emphasized that the caste occupation is very important and that they respected it. They could not afford to look down upon it as it gave them their livelihood; if they feel ashamed of their caste, then it would be like betraying it, being false to their salt.

The community wants its younger generation to be trained in professional beauty care considering other castes have “infiltrated” the booming business of beauty salons/palors for women and men. They can also be trained in Ayurvedic courses and in music as they are backed by a long-standing caste heritage in both these areas. The community, according to the leaders, suffers from low education, slow modernization and poverty as can be seen from the fact that most of their people continue to live in mud houses. For the past few decades, the community has witnessed large-scale migration of men from the villages to cities or even to the Gulf countries where they work as laborers and scavengers. According to their estimate, at least one-third of the men have migrated, either to the Gulf or the cities. They have no assets, they own no house or land, are in deep debt, and lead a hand-to-mouth existence. A person who owns a house is considered extremely fortunate.

Their caste is looked down upon by society. According to the community leaders, this can be changed only with education that will bring in its wake economic growth and a rise in social and caste standing. Unfortunately, the community is too poor to afford education in private schools while no education worth the name is imparted in government schools. Besides, English, which they believe is a passport to success, is not taught in government schools. When even school education is out of reach of the community, higher education is unthinkable with college fees running into thousands of rupees. Education has become a luxury item; it has become out of reach of the community, they said.

Modernization has displaced the community from its occupation and the few benefits it got traditionally. Earlier, each well-off family would have a “family barber” which meant that the barber’s services would be available to all the men in the family both for their daily needs like shaving a beard and during weddings; during childbirth the Nayi Brahmin women who were the traditional midwives, would be on hand ready with their services. In return for their services, the family was given one acre of land and a bag of paddy every year for every male served. This “family service” has changed over the years with men shaving their beards themselves at home and using a barber’s services only for a haircut. Women too have been displaced from their traditional occupation of midwifery with the modernization of medical care and the emphasis on delivering babies in hospital for both the safety of mother and child. The Nayi Brahmin community women, therefore, have taken to alternative wage earning by rolling beedis or going for agricultural labor.

Community leaders admit that women resort to feticide due to “domination” by men. Dowry has become widespread in the community and every family gets into debt to perform

a daughter's marriage. The going rate of dowry now is Rs2–3 lakhs in addition to a gift of a motorbike. Marriage expenses too are borne by the bride's family all of which cast a huge financial burden on the family.

As for running the barber shops, the community faces all kinds of hurdles. For a start, not many people are willing to let out their commercial space to a barber's hair-cutting salon as they consider it to be "dirty" and hence, inauspicious for them. Interestingly, building owners prefer to rent out their space to a women's beauty parlor rather than a men's haircutting salon. And should a men's haircutting salon be successful, there is every danger of the owner asking them to vacate it believing he would get a higher rent for a "better" business than haircutting.

Most of the men work at the traditional occupation of haircutting in commercial salons on a "half-half" basis with the person who owns the business. That is, for every customer served, the owner and the worker each get half of the fee charged to the customer. A trend that is worrying the community leaders is the "infiltration" of other castes into the business of haircare, those who have the capital to set up a commercial establishment since increasingly haircare among men is becoming trendy and fashionable and hence has become a profitable proposition. If only the government can help in training the traditional barbers in the latest trends and modernize their capacities, there would be no looking back for the community, they say.

The community has organized itself into small cooperative societies since neither private sector nor public sector banks give any loans to them. Only one public sector bank in Nizamabad city gives them loans. As for the government-run BC Finance Corporation, it has no "targeted" allocations caste-wise and hence, the community gets short shrift.

The leaders suggested that government-funded jobs like auxiliary nurse and midwife should be reserved for the community's women since midwifery has been their caste occupation. Also, the government should ensure free education to the community's women, being one of the most backward, from kindergarten to post-graduation (KG to PG), they said.

The backwardness of the community can be gauged from the fact that so far there has been no Member of Legislative Assembly or Member of Legislative Council from the community to represent or take up its interests and hence, no minister either in the last 73 years of independence. According to a leader who half-joked, such is the social status of his community that is people "qualify" for only cheap liquor during elections while the more "powerful" community men get a quarter or even full bottle of regular liquor! This is part of the various tactics employed by politicians to woo voters during elections.

### **Voices of the women of the Nayi Brahmin community**

The caste occupation of women disappeared two generations ago. Traditionally, the Nayi Brahmin men would cut hair, shave beards, clean ears while their women would deliver and clean the newborn babies, and help the mothers to bathe the babies until the new mother got the hang of it. These women also doubled as doctors for particular diseases, vending traditional medicines for a variety of fevers including jaundice. Now these traditional roles of women have been rendered irrelevant with the spread of institutional and modern healthcare. Among the younger generation, no woman has ever delivered a baby. Knowledge of the traditional medicines which was considered an asset of the family, has been lost from lack of demand as people prefer modern medicines.

With the scope for traditional occupation disappearing, women of the Nayi Brahmin community have over the past couple of generations, moved en masse to beedi-rolling. Nizamabad city in Telangana has been a beedi industry hub for past 70–80 years. Beedi-rolling is a cottage industry with most of the rollers doing the work at home and almost the entire workforce com-

prising of women. The older women recalled that they had started the work in their youth, they were paid Rs2.50 for every 1,000 beedis rolled. Now they get paid Rs130 per 1,000 beedis. On an average, these women make Rs700–1,000 a month. There is no scope to earn more because the industry is reportedly in the doldrums with the demand for beedis falling; the industry has accordingly cut down on the production which has hit the women badly. Each woman gets no more than 1,000 beedis a month to roll which works out to Rs1,000 a month.

### ***Precarious existence***

This researcher met with women of Nayi Brahmin community in a locality that is named after their community which is in the Angadi Bazar area of Nizamabad city. Almost all women roll beedis to supplement the family income. None of the women had ever done the community's traditional work of midwifery. For at least two generations, women have been rolling beedis for their livelihood while men have pursued the traditional caste occupation. Education for men is minimal while for women it is almost nonexistent. The women earn on an average of Rs750–1,000 a month making beedis while men earn Rs100–150 a day working as barbers in haircutting salons for men. Almost all women said their men drink alcohol regularly and give the bare minimum money for the household. Some admitted they too drink but not as much as the men or as regularly. They certainly spend the man part of their earnings on their family, unlike men. Almost all houses, the women said, are run on the women's earnings. "Every day, he gives Rs10 for vegetables, Rs10 for milk. The rest he keeps for himself," said a woman of her husband's contribution to the household. An old woman and her bedridden husband depend on their unmarried, polio-affected daughter for sustenance. The young girl earns Rs1,000 a month by rolling beedis. "We live on Rs30 a day. We barely manage to survive," admitted the old woman. No man goes to work regularly and therefore what he earns hardly provides for the family. "Our jati (caste) is like that and that is why our lives are like this," said another woman blaming the caste for their collective misery.

"If beedis were not there, we would have been on the road or would have migrated," said another woman hinting at the less-than-desirable alternative resorted to by the poorest who inevitably belong to the lowest castes in the social hierarchy, namely sex work. The women said they would be happy to get a job that will pay them Rs200 a day, an amount on which their families would live comfortably.

### **Nayi Brahmin community of Metrajpalli village of Dichpally mandal**

The village of 500-odd families has six Nayi Brahmin households. Women from all the households were present at the meeting. The older women explained that their caste profession of delivering babies was dead as all women opted for institutional childbirth. The older and experienced women, however, are occasionally sought out to perform another traditional job, of bathing the newborn babies. Another traditional task is that of giving a bath to a young girl when she has her first menstruation. As menstruation is considered unclean traditionally, the menstruating girl is kept in isolation for about a week or ten days, until the bleeding stops. Then, she is given a bath by the barber woman as nobody else will touch the girl as she was "soiled." Only after she is cleansed with a bath, is the girl accepted into the house.

As in Nizamabad city's Nayi Brahmin community, the women of this community too took to rolling beedis as the traditional jobs began to disappear. Earlier, the girls would be roped in by the mothers to do the task of tying up and securing the rolled beedi's open end with thread, a fairly simple job. "The girls were like apprentices, getting introduced to the work, and then later

joining us to increase our output and earnings,” said a woman. They had to learn the work on the job, just like the women of earlier generations learnt the traditional job of delivering babies, clipping and tying the umbilical cord, cleaning up the newborn and so on. Now all the girls are sent to school to get an education. But they are still trained in beedi-rolling, like a caste occupation. “Whether they use it to earn a livelihood or not is another matter,” said an older woman. In the same manner, the young boys too practice the caste occupation of cutting hair, shaving and so on in addition to attending school and college.

### ***Men’s and caste occupation***

Traditionally, the Nayi Brahmin men would practice their caste occupation of shaving and cutting hair at the homes of the clients in the village for which each family would give the Nayi Brahmin men paddy once every six months for their services. Each of the powerful, upper-caste landed families had a family barber. But change came about a generation ago when haircutting salons became popular and barber men stopped going to the house of the rich or the landed to render their services. But this practice has not stopped entirely. Some barber-men go still to the powerful people’s house with their box of equipment to shave and cut hair and so on. Also, the older system of “aasam,” of giving rice/paddy in return for the services of the barber (in fact, of any service provided), prevails with a handful of Kapu families in the village who are the landlords, having anywhere between 5 and 20 acres of land. The Nayi Brahmin families too own land but it is no more than half an acre. The women say such a small piece of land is a waste since it is too small to yield them anything in good measure but admit that it is security. The women believe that the days gone by were better because the caste profession and the money they earned had “barkat,” that is they fulfilled their needs which is not the case now since however much they earn, it does not seem to be enough. Earlier, the women would go round the houses of the better-off people and get leftovers that they ate which meant that their food need was met for the day. In the night, the mother-in-law would make “ambali” gruel from jowar atta, and the family’s nourishment needs were met.

### ***Women and education***

The women interviewed in both locations (Nizamabad city and Metrajpalli village) were in the age group of 30–60 years. Almost all were non-literate, even those who were younger. However, they said they attended school for a couple of years but whatever they learnt, the alphabet, has been forgotten because they did not practice either reading or writing, because there was no scope or encouragement. They had not heard of classes for adults nor would they be able to attend even if they were held as they were busy with household work and beedi-rolling which left them with no time for any other activity.

The women of Metrajpalli were keen that their daughters should get what was denied to them, the mothers, namely education. “I would like to study even now,” said one of the mothers. Today, unlike when they were young, the times are more accepting of girls’ education. They would like their daughters to get into a job even if the salary is low. “We don’t want them to suffer like we do in this back-breaking work of beedi-rolling,” said one of them as the others nodded their heads in agreement. Interestingly, there is a difference of perception among the women with those in the village taking a more modern view of girls’ education than those in the city. Perhaps the major reason for this is that Metrajpalli village is unique for the reason that it has turned out to be a hub of employed people, and evidently the atmosphere of studying and getting into government employment has spread to all communities. Metrajpalli village, about

25 km from Nizamabad city and 12 km from the highway, is a village of 500-odd families where 25 percent of the households has one or two men in government employment, and this is across the castes. The first Nayi Brahmin subinspector of police in the district is from this village. In all, there are as many as 200 men who are employed with the government, with every other department having an employee hailing from Metrajpalli. The villagers attribute this phenomenon to the location of the government high school in the village since 1965 which was a boon and facilitator of encouraging the youth to go for higher studies. This effect has multiplied over the years. The young men of this village, in large numbers, write every single exam for recruitment held by the government while girls too continue with their studies although none of them has found employment in the government as yet.

### ***Education for boys ... and girls***

Most of the women of the Nizamabad group said they were keen to get their children educated as they believe their plight is because they have no education. But the degree of keenness varies for daughters and sons. Almost everybody's son was in a private English-medium school whereas the daughter was sent to a government school, if at all. A mother of two girls and a son sends the girls to a government school and the son to a private English-medium school. She denied that she discriminated, saying that she had to pay fees even in the government school. She pays Rs700 per year for each girl, she said angrily. And how much is her son's fees? Rs6,000 per year, she admitted hesitantly.

A middle-aged woman gave birth to a son after a gap of 12 years. She pulled her daughter out of school so that she can help her with the household work and also hold the baby while the mother rolled beedis after doing the household chores. The women denied any discrimination against the girls saying if they spent high amounts on educating their sons, they had to spend an equal amount, if not more, on the girls by way of dowry and marriage expenses. In both cases, they were investing in their children's future, they said: For a good job for the son and for marriage with a "good" man for the daughter.

### ***Preference for sons***

Among the 30-odd families of Nayi Brahmins who met for data collection in Nizamabad, almost all of the women were young, in their 30s with the exception of a couple who were middle-aged and two who were old. Almost none of the young women had daughters. They had only sons. There were only three preteen girls in the 30-odd families. While two girls were being sent to a government school, one was pulled out of her school by her mother to take care of the housework and her newborn sibling. Two women had older unmarried daughters, in their late 20s who were supporting their aged parents. Asked about the preponderance of boys in that group, the women said it was "god's will." They were aware of the sex determination tests but denied they had aborted their female fetuses. A rare college-educated married woman with a child, who was employed as a computer operator in a private company, was defensive when asked about it and pointed out that it was a crime to reveal the sex of the fetus as can be seen from the notices pasted in hospitals in big print. Therefore, it was not possible to get female fetuses aborted, she insisted.

However, the women admitted that they were harassed by the husband and in-laws if they gave birth to baby girls. In fact, a woman who had a girl for her first born was told by her husband that she would have to leave the house if she did not bear him a son the second time round. She got a son after ten years and "he allowed me to stay," she said. She did not want to

elaborate on the reason for the gap of ten years between the two children. One can only guess that perhaps she aborted female fetuses. While one woman with two sons regretted not having a daughter “as she would have helped me in the housework” another one pointed out that if dowry was given to daughters, the sons were no less demanding. They criticize their parents for not making property for them. Another woman wanted the government to ban both giving and taking of dowry. “I have two sons,” she said proudly to show that she was against dowry despite having sons.

Two old women narrated their tale of woe even though they had sons. They said they were deserted by their sons soon after the sons started their own families. According to her neighbors, one woman even fell at the feet of her two sons, begging them to take her with them but they did not agree and left the town. The aged woman survives by washing dishes in better-off households. She does not have even a ration card. She now has an additional problem to deal with. She has a cricket ball-sized tumor in her armpit but is unable to get surgery as she has no money.

The other aged woman is a widow and her one son, who is married, has asked her to live on her own and moved out with his wife. She used to make beedis but is now too old for it. While discussing the reasons for preferring sons, a woman said the sons ensured a passage to heaven according to Hindu beliefs. To this another woman reacted angrily, “While the parents are alive the son won’t help them but will show us the way to Heaven after we are dead … what’s the use of such sons?” she said.

### ***Daughters’ marriage and dowry***

The Metrajpalli women recalled they were married when they were 11 or 12 years old. Since they were married off early because their family wanted to “get rid of them” they said they would get their daughters married only when they were around 20 years or so. This way, both the girls and the community would develop, they said. Marriage and dowry had become huge issues for families with girls. Earlier marriage was a simple affair and not a burden as it has become nowadays, they said. Earlier, if the bride’s family gave 10 g of gold and a bicycle as dowry, it was considered huge. The cash paid was Rs116. But today, at least Rs10 lakhs are required to get a daughter married, they said. How do they raise the amount? Take a loan or sell land. If the family has neither land nor can it raise a loan, then they would even sell the house in which they live. Nowadays, such is the demand for things by the groom’s family that they are even asking for a gas connection or a cylinder. Yet, after giving so much, the girls have no voice. They have to keep quiet even if they are beaten to a pulp by the husband “like tamarind,” they said. Asked if these problems were common to only women of their community or to all women, a woman said all women faced such problems. While some admitted to them, others were inhibited or ashamed to talk about them. “Our liberation is only on death. Till then, ours is an unending struggle, a struggle just to survive,” she said.

### ***Feticide***

The Metrajpalli women were aware of feticide and blamed it on the dowry problem. But none of them would admit that they knew of women in their families or extended families who had aborted a female fetus. Interestingly, they echoed the argument of the Nizamabad women: It was wrong to say that girls are a burden because they need a dowry. “Don’t the boys need money? Don’t they ask for property?” they asked. So why were female fetuses aborted? “You ask those who aborted. We don’t know anything,” they said defensively.

### **Caste discrimination**

According to the women, the caste borders had become porous and caste discrimination is not overtly visible even in the village. Earlier, the Brahmins would not accept back the vessel in which they would give leftovers to the Nayi Brahmins. Or they would sprinkle water on the vessel that would have to be placed on the ground, thus cleansing it since “low” caste people had touched it. Nowadays, the Brahmins even enter the homes of the Nayi Brahmins. And the Nayi Brahmins even sit next to the Kapu landlords. Asked if they would allow the “untouchable” Madiga into their home, they said no. But the Madiga families in the village do invite them to their weddings which they attend. However, they partake of the wedding feast. They return home after blessing the married couple by putting “akshintalu” or the auspicious rice on the couple’s heads. As for inter-caste marriage in the community, both groups of Nizamabad and Metrajpalli said there was no such thing in their community as yet. They totally disapproved of inter-caste marriage. If the youngsters insist on marrying outside the caste, they will be thrown out of the house, they said.

Every woman who was interviewed expressed deep regret for not being educated. “I wish I were educated. I would have climbed mountains. But what to do? My karma is bad. My fate is no good,” said one interviewee in Nizamabad. Another said a woman would not be subjected to domestic violence by the husband if only the woman was educated. Even though this is not quite true both in India and elsewhere in the world but perhaps this sentiment can be interpreted as the interviewee’s belief that education was empowerment.

### **Profile of the Rajaka community**

The washer community or the Rajaka or Chakali, is one of the most backward among the OBCs. Along with the Nayi Brahmins, they were considered the “daughters” of society as these two communities were responsible for serving society by keeping it clean by washing their clothes, shaving and cutting hair, basically doing supposedly “unclean” jobs and “serving” the society, like daughters are supposed to. However, this status gave them no better status than is given to a daughter by society. The two communities were at the bottom of the caste hierarchy, abused, ill-treated, looked down upon as unclean people and untouchable. The Rajaka community still practices patron-client relationship in terms of their traditional caste occupation. Today, in the 21st century, they remain among the most backward of people. A major demand of the community for the past three decades and more has been to include it in the Scheduled Caste list as they too are considered untouchable and not allowed into homes by the other castes. Since the washer community washes the clothes of the SCs also, they said the community was lower than the SCs in the social hierarchy and hence, should be included in the list of SCs. In states such as Maharashtra and Karnataka the Rajakas are included in the SC list whereas in Kerala, the community lives in hilly areas and has been given the status of STs. Besides, being among the weakest, the community is victimized and abused regularly. At least 1,000 incidents of atrocities including social boycott take place a year against the community in the two states of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh, according to community leaders. If they get the status of SCs then they would have the protection of the SC and ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989. So far, the efforts of the community have not been fructified in the two Telugu states. Presently, they are listed in the BC “A” category, that is, the most backward of the backward castes.

According to estimates, there are about two lakhs Rajaka people in each district of Telangana. Literacy is low in the community and the migration of males is very high. A large number go to the Gulf/Dubai or Mumbai to work in low-paid jobs. Several of them from Nizamabad

have migrated to Navsari in Surat in Gujarat as there are better opportunities as washer people. According to the community leaders, the number of Rajaka employees in the government or public sector is very low. There is not a single Indian Administrative Service or Indian Foreign Service officer in Telangana from the Rajaka community while one MLA from Warangal belongs to the community. However, due to reservation at the grassroots level, as many as 129 Rajaka candidates were elected as sarpanch in the last Panchayati Raj elections. Community leaders believe that the two-pronged strategy, of social protection by declaring them as SCs and political reservation would go a long way in improving the socio-economic strength of the community.

Unlike other communities in which the better-off persons of the community started or funded hostels for students of their community, there is no such facility among the Rajaka people. There is no scope for such a venture as there are no well-off persons in the community; even if there are some better-off people, they do not own the community and prefer to keep a distance from it as they feel ashamed to admit they belong a “low” caste, according to community leaders.

### **Voices of leaders of the Rajaka community leaders**

Community leaders admit that education levels are very low in the community mostly because children too are put to work, especially girls. Alcoholism too is widespread since, according to them, they need to drink to get relief from the hugely strenuous work they do the entire day. Both men and women drink. Domestic violence is prevalent, as a leader admitted, it is a “trait” that is common to men. Since 75 percent of the caste occupation, that is washing clothes, is done by the women, girls “naturally” accompany their mothers to work and hence, do not go to school, they explained. The practice of dowry has corrupted the community, but the amount demanded is not too high as the community does not have that kind of prosperity as the rest of society, they said. Earlier, while expenses for marriage would have been between Rs10,000 and 20,000, nowadays, it is between Rs50,000 and 1.5 lakhs.

Almost all the community leaders pointed out that their women are especially vulnerable to sexual abuse since they visit each house twice a day, once to collect the washing in the morning, and then to deliver the clean washing in the evening. “They literally put their head in the mouth of the tiger daily,” a community leader said. They are also prone to verbal abuse, ill-treatment and humiliation. If the community is included in the SCs list, it would provide security to their women under the SC and ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989.

### **Voices of Rajaka women**

Women bear an equal burden of the labor of washing clothes which is a family-based work since men, women and children participate in it. Although there is no demarcation of work by gender, traditionally, women collected the soiled clothes from homes in the morning and delivered the washed ones in the evening. Men washed the clothes in a local water body and dried them. Women too washed along with men. In recent times, women have entirely taken over washing while men do the ironing. In some cases, however, the men have moved to other occupations or migrated to other countries/towns looking for a more sustainable livelihood outside the traditional caste occupation and the entire burden of collecting, washing and delivering the clothes has fallen on the women. Today, in rural and semi-urban areas, washing clothes in the community is a woman-dominated work.

### ***Caste profession and respect***

The women Rajaka community at the Dhobi Ghat in Pragatinagar in Nizamabad town, were vocal about their struggle to make a livelihood. Their work gave them a livelihood, but it did not give them any respect, they said. “Neither we nor our work has any value. Perhaps beggars are better off than us as they get more respect than us,” said Rajamma. Sattevva who has been working since she was eight years old, curses her fate for having born in the Rajaka caste.

She said,

Several times a day I wonder why we should lead a life like this. Sometimes there is no time even to eat. It would have been better to have been born in a Dalit’s house; their lot is better than ours. Our life is the worst of all. Neither our life nor our work has any value. That is one reason why our children don’t want to do the dhobi job. Even if they get less, they prefer to do a job gives them respect.

Suguna said the hard labor that they do the entire day barely manages to give them enough to get their children educated and to help the family to survive. “We cannot save even ten rupees … Not a single day we eat full stomach or sleep a full night’s sleep,” she said. An aged Pochavva said their life seemed to have no meaning other than slog day and night. She has to work, climb up and down the bank of the water body several times a day despite having had a hip fracture and a rod inserted. “The leg does ache but what alternative do I have?” she asked.

Padma said though they work hard they think equally hard before indulging themselves. She thinks several times before buying an expensive sari, costing Rs500 or thereabouts. “The amount will pay for a gas cylinder which will last us two months,” she said.

### ***Alcoholism in the community***

The women were vocal about the impact of drinking by men. How can the family develop if men drink and waste money, they asked. Another addiction is of gutkha. Although it is banned, it is available in the black market. On average, the men spend Rs50–60 on gutkha, according to the women. They said the men’s alcoholism was not merely a waste of scarce earnings, but it affected women and children in the family as most men turned violent on getting drunk. They wanted the government to reintroduce prohibition in the state. In fact, they said, it should be across the country, not just in the state. The earlier undivided AP government under Chief Minister N. T. Rama Rao had introduced prohibition in 1995. However, his successor, N. Chandrababu Naidu revoked the prohibition citing several reasons including loss of revenue (Janyala 2019).

### ***Hospitals a boon for Rajakas***

Almost all of the 20 families that work at the Dhobi Ghat work with different hospitals of Nizamabad. They are paid a monthly salary. In addition, they are allowed to collect a fixed fee from the patient at the rate of Rs250 for every delivery case for washing the clothes of the new mother for a week. Nizamabad has become a medical center with a large number of hospitals having been set up. This development came as a boon for these families as they get assured work, a regular salary and payment from patients. “If it was not for the hospital work, none of us could have managed to get our children educated and made their future,” said Suguna.

### ***Long days, strenuous work***

On average, they put in 12 hours of work at the Dhobi Ghat, collecting the soiled clothes, washing and drying and then delivering the clean wash. Each one of them washes 25–30 bedsheets for every hospital. They have to bear the cost of inputs to wash the clothes which includes fuel for the stoves, the electricity used for running the motor of the borewell that supplies the water, detergent and caustic soda. Earlier, before the Dhobi Ghat was constructed they would wash the clothes in the polluted water of the local stream. Thanks to a local politician-industrialist, the Dhobi Ghat was built on government land and equipped with a water tank and a borewell powered by a motor. While the land came free, each of the families using the Dhobi Ghat contributed towards the cost of buying the motor and constructing the water tank. This has ensured that they wash the clothes in clean water. The women are soaked to the skin while washing the clothes. They stand in water through all the seasons. Their skin peels off due to handling of soda daily and some women say their hair turns red as it gets splashed with water containing caustic soda daily. Some of them said it was easy to recognize a Rajaka woman as often there is loss of hair above her forehead due to the pressure of the weight of the bundle of clothes that she hangs from her head. The more enterprising among them supplement their income by running an ironing business from home, collecting clothes and delivering them after ironing them.

### ***Uncertainty and insecurity of wages/work***

Asking for an increase in their wages invariably gets them into trouble, both in cities like Nizamabad and in villages where often these escalate into verbal conflict and result in social boycott of the community. “It is as if we commit a sin by asking for an increase in salary,” said Padma. A threat to their job now comes from women who are willing to work as Ayahs in hospitals and whose work includes washing clothes soiled with excrement, menstrual blood, vomit and so on. Women from other castes such as Goud, Muslim and even Reddy are willing to do this work, according to the Rajaka women. Clearly, the compulsions of making a living and supporting the family, facilitated by an urbanizing environment, are prompting women to cross the caste barriers and take to traditionally “unclean” caste occupations.

### ***Women and oppression***

Rajaka women were aware of feticide and knew families that practiced it but said it was not prevalent in their community. They admitted that it was wrong but said that women have had to suffer oppression from ancient times. Even though women do hundreds of things they are still considered useless, said one of them. Even goddesses like Sita, Savitri and Anasuya suffered because they belonged to the “caste” of women. God created only two castes, male and female, while humans created the rest of the castes, according to a Rajaka woman.

Asked about love/inter-caste marriage another woman said that since such marriages seemed to become a trend, she would have no option but to agree if her sons who were educated, preferred women of their choice and outside the community. But she believed such marriages do not last. “Only traditional marriages last because they have the support of the community and of the family. Since everybody is saying it is not wrong, we too have to echo it as what else can we do? But such marriages don’t last,” she said.

### ***Government schools of no use***

The women believe that education was the only way to end discrimination but pointed out that the government schools were in Telugu-medium only and were “useless” as they have no teachers, no facilities and are housed in buildings that are dilapidated and a danger to the children attending them. Nobody from the community in the city sends their children to government schools. On the other hand, private schools have become a luxury for them in the sense that they cannot afford the high fees charged by the private schools. Women admitted they send their girls to government schools and boys to private English-medium schools since they believe that boys need to build their future whereas girls do not; their future lies in marriage.

### ***Profile of the Kuruma community***

The Golla-Kuruma castes are pastoral communities of shepherds. While the Gollas are cattle-herders, the Kurumas are sheep- and goat-herders. These are two subcastes that traditionally socialized with each other but did not inter-marry since one was considered superior to the other. But that hierarchy is giving way in modern times. The Golla-Kurumas are one of the largest OBC communities and are present in every village. Sheep-rearing is one of the most strenuous jobs since the sheep need to be taken out for grazing that involves walking for several miles in search of pastures and bringing them back home at night. The community was semi-nomadic, especially during the summer when pastures and all greenery dries up. The shepherds drive their flock for long distances over several days in search of pastures for their animals.

Apart from rearing sheep, the Kurumas were adept at weaving blankets called gongadi, from sheep wool. Gongadi which is Telangana’s trademark blanket is an all-weather, all-purpose cover used by the men which traditionally distinguished them from men of other castes. The family used it as a blanket on cold nights. Like all caste occupations, this skill of wool-weaving too was handed down from father to son.

### ***Voices of Kuruma community leaders***

The Kuruma community is fairly influential in Nizamabad, with several men running small industries and involved in politics. The caste association has a strong presence in the community thanks to a few leaders who had a vision for the development of their community. The caste association called Kuruma Sangam has been set up in the city and it has taken the lead in enabling the community in several ways. One of the caste leaders, who is economically strong and politically powerful, has constructed a commercial building in one of the most important areas of the city. The income yielded by the commercial space in the complex is used for the community. The building also houses a hostel for Kuruma male students and a community hall which is rented out to the community on a discounted rate to hold social functions such as weddings. Besides, in the event of a death, the Sangam gives Rs5,000 to the bereaved family to tide over the expenses that are involved. The Sangam has also been giving loans to the community members. It is in the process of working out a scheme to provide an old age pension of Rs1,000 per month for senior citizens of the community. In response to a demand by the women of the community, the Sangam is planning to provide a sewing machine and train women in tailoring by organizing free classes so that the community women are able to supplement the family income. The Sangam is planning to fight the practice of child marriages, which is the norm in the community, by focusing on educating the parents to put off marriage of the daughter until she is 18 years, the official marriage age.

### ***Sex selection prevalent in the community***

An office-bearer of the Kuruma Sangam who is also a politically active, said in an interview that sex selection and son preference was indeed prevalent in the community, especially in the city. But he said it was not fair to point out only the Kuruma community. “It is an open secret. It is prevalent in all communities,” he said. He admitted that girls are considered inferior and that they have no equality within the family or in the community. Yet there are a few women who have gone against convention and have been doing business in the city. His own mother has been running a kirana shop for the past 36 years. Influenced by his mother and by the ethos of business in the family, he himself started a small-scale industrial unit to manufacture ginger-garlic paste which is in great demand in all households. He was also allotted a ration shop by the government and has leased it out to another party.

### ***Impact of alcoholism on women***

Regarding the community’s problems, he said that while there was improvement on the education and economy fronts in the community, an issue that was of concern was the “harassment” of women by men addicted to liquor. He used the word “harassment” to mean domestic violence, verbal abuse and mental torture of women by alcoholic men. Even women and children consume liquor and liquor addiction had become a gigantic problem. It could be solved only through imposition of prohibition, he said.

### ***Voices of Kuruma women***

The beedi (a poor cousin of cigarette) industry has been a boon to the women of the lower castes in the city as also in the entire district of Nizamabad. Beedi-making is the new caste occupation of women of lower castes. The Kuruma men and women in the city have been disassociated with the caste profession of goat- and sheep-rearing and weaving of the “gon-gadi.” For the last two to three generations, while the women have taken to beedi-making for a livelihood, the men worked in the wholesale market in the city called the Gunj. This researcher met up with about 25 Kuruma women in two meetings in Nizamabad city. The women said they and their mothers made a living by rolling beedis and supported the family. Asked for how many years they had been rolling beedis, one woman said since the time when her mother-in-law was paid a wage of Rs2.50 for every 1,000 beedis rolled. Today, they are paid Rs100–120 per 1,000 beedis; that is how long the women of the family have been in beedi-rolling work.

### ***Education most important for improving life***

The older women believed that girls of their generation were not educated due to poverty and lack of awareness of the importance of education. The younger women, who were in their 30s, feel bad now for not studying beyond 10th class or less. Since they missed out on a better life by giving education a miss, they said they pressurize their children to study well. If they are educated, they can improve their economic status by getting into an income-generating activity and not just limit themselves to housekeeping and caring for the family. “It is very important for women to earn and contribute to the family income especially as one income is not sufficient nowadays.” That education and job improves the status of the women, they believed, was secondary.

According to the women, the age of marriage in the city's better-off section of the community has increased to 23–25 years but not among those who are poor. Still, the situation is better at present. Earlier the young girls would be married off on completing 10th class, or if they failed, in a lower class. Nowadays, the girls themselves want to study further, stand on their own feet and then consider marriage. No restraints are imposed on the girls, the women said. Will they send the girls to Hyderabad (about 175 km away) to study further? "What is Hyderabad when we are sending them to the US?" came the response. But in terms of marriage the girls have really no choice. Why will she not want to marry, was the puzzled response to the question if they would allow their daughter to remain single if she so desired. Not getting married was a thought that had never crossed their mind.

### ***Feticide in the community***

When asked if there was feticide in the community, the women said that every one of them who was present at the meeting had a daughter which showed that they did not practice feticide. The women however said they had heard of the practice and said technology made it easier to know the gender of the fetus. They knew that the doctors who are not supposed to tell the gender of the fetus after scanning, do in fact share that information with the parents. As for those who could not afford the expensive scanning and abortion, they were giving birth to baby girls and then discarding them in the garbage bins, they said.

### ***"Advantages" of having a son***

Asked why sons were preferred over daughters, they said the sons carried forward the family line. Besides, they would "walk in front of the body" of the parent or lead the way to the cremation/burial ground, as is the tradition, and then light the funeral pyre or throw the first handful of earth after the body is lowered into the ground for burial. Besides, sons take care of their aged parents. Another major benefit of having a son was cited by some women: Sons are a guarantee for moneylenders. Should the father fail to pay the loan or die or commit suicide, then the son would have to take the responsibility of repaying the loan. Thus, having a son is an advantage, a guarantee for a loan should the family need it, which it does all the time considering their economy is very fragile. On the other hand, there is no such expectation of a daughter of the house; they are not called upon to repay the loan in the event of the father's death. Hence, sons are desirable. After listing these reasons, most of the women came out with stories of the neglect and abuse of aged and sick parents by their sons even though some of them were well off. They gave instances of neighbors or relatives going to the rescue of the abandoned and abused elder parents. A woman said police complaints should be lodged against such sons. The women were aware of the fact that it was illegal to neglect aged parents and that the sons could be prosecuted.

### ***Profile of the Goud community***

The Goud community or toddy tappers are one of the largest communities among the OBCs. Although fairly low on the caste scale of hierarchy and considered midway between the most backward and the most forward among the backwards, the community is one of the fast-developing communities, both politically and economically. However, as in the other three communities studied, Goud women too remain in the shadow of development having little education, confined to the traditional role as housewife, earning a pittance through a daily wage as beedi-rollers or in agricultural labor. Clearly, women are considered inferior, girls considered

a burden mainly due to dowry and marriage expenses, and hence, son preference is dominant. This researcher met community leaders in Nizamabad and in Kothapet village that was recommended by Goud leaders to visit for data on the community's women because it is one of the few villages in the district where the Goud community is predominant numerically. Kothapet village is on the Nizamabad-Varni highway, about 20 km from Nizamabad city. There are as many as 68 license-holders for toddy-tapping in the village under a government scheme called Tree for Tapper. Under this scheme every tapper gets a license to tap trees for toddy on payment of a license fee. The license is valid for five years. These men tap toddy and sell it in bottles on the highway. Toddy tappers selling toddy on the roadside is a common sight seen on most of the highways in Telangana.

The older generation men said the area had been thickly populated by toddy trees in the past but most of them were felled over the years to clear land for cultivation. Very few trees are left, and these give them a livelihood. The men said if they had been aware of their rights, they would not have allowed the felling of trees and would have thus protected their livelihood. Since there are not many trees to give all the households a livelihood, several men go to other villages far away to tap them.

The older men said that their caste profession is no more a paying one. The younger generation especially is opting out of the profession for several reasons like it being seen as "low status," being risky since they have to climb tall palm trees to tap the toddy, not remunerative enough and being seasonal. Instead, they prefer to drive autorickshaws or even go for agricultural daily wage labor. They do not see toddy tapping as a profession surviving for long. "We are the last generation of toddy tappers who follow the traditional caste profession," said an elder.

### ***Position of women in the community***

The community leaders both in Nizamabad and Kothapet said that daughters were a burden because the family incurred huge debts to pay for their dowry and marriage. There was no one who got their daughter married without getting into a huge debt, they said. The prevailing dowry "rate" in the community was around Rs2–3 lakhs in Kothapet including a motorbike that had become an essential part of the demands such as gold and cash. In Nizamabad city, the dowry amount was three to four times more.

They pointed out that all castes, not merely the Goud community, were educating their girls, and that child marriage that had been common earlier in the community, had been given up totally. Now the girls were being married after they completed high school. Education for girls is necessary now, but not for reasons of their awareness or empowerment but to make sure she gets "good matches" for marriage. If illiterate, she can hope to be married off only to an illiterate/semi-literate toddy tapper. She cannot get a "better" match. Therefore, schooling for girls has become essential nowadays. But if the girl wants to study further, she is not allowed since marriage is more important for a girl. The girl is married off at an average age of 15–16 years; hence, she has a chance of completing the 10th class. A girl engineer or a doctor is a rarity in the community unless she belongs to an affluent family based in an urban metropolis. Girls are a "burden" to the parents who want to relieve themselves of her as soon as possible: She's like a fragile thing (glass) that can easily break or shatter and bring a bad name to the family, said a community elder. The dowry can go up to Rs10 lakhs if the groom is employed. In the last two decades, the dowry demand had seen exponential growth of the dowry, especially in the cities, according to a leader. In the early 1990s, it was Rs20,000; by the mid-1990s it increased to Rs70,000; in the 2000s, it increased to Rs1.5 lakhs; in the 2010s, it was Rs3–5 lakhs. Today, it is Rs 7–10 lakhs.

### **Voices of Goud women of Kothapet**

Kothapet village which had a large population of the Goud community, has all the advantages of being close to a growing city, having access to high school, jobs for young men outside their caste occupation and social influences such as importance of girls' education.

#### ***Jobs for sons and school education for daughters***

A large number of women gathered in a room for a discussion of issues facing the Goud women and the caste. Most women were young having teenaged children while some older women too were present. Most women's concerns centered around their sons' future. They said the young men, who had studied up to intermediate level or graduation and some had even an engineering degree, should be given a job as promised by those who had fought for a separate Telangana state. Most of them wanted only a government job and were not ready to get into a job in the private sector. The village has about 100 such qualified young men, some of whom have taken to driving autorickshaws to make a livelihood. "What we want is jobs for our children," said the women, meaning sons. They had no such expectations for their daughters. They pointed out that all of them were getting their daughters educated up to 12th class and one of the reasons for this was that the high school was located in the village. Very few girls had a degree though. Asked why they were educating their girls, the women said, because their daughters would not be able to do the "rough and crude" work of working in the fields like the mothers did. "If they get an education, they can earn on their own by doing perhaps tailoring or some such occupation," they said. The upper ceiling for girls' education of up to 12th class seemed to be the norm in the village. The women admitted that they and their mothers were not educated as education for girls was not seen as important or necessary in their youth. But their "eyes were opened" by seeing other communities send their daughters to school, exposure to the city of Nizamabad and of course, the mass media. But a very important reason was the availability of a high school in the village that made it easier for parents to continue the girls' education beyond primary school. Another woman said she had dreamt of sending her daughter for higher education, but she did not have the means of supporting her.

#### ***Dowry and marriage of daughters***

The women said the practice of giving dowry in their community was a recent phenomenon. The women, all of whom were in their 30s, said their parents had given them dowry in thousands (rupees) while today they are needing to give dowry to their daughters in lakhs. They recalled that their mothers got no dowry at all, a mere two or three generations ago. "Our caste gave no dowry at one time but today it is much higher than in other castes," said Balamani, a mother of two young children. She herself is landless and the family subsists on the couple's daily wage labor. Kaushalya said she made a little money by rolling beedis while her husband was a tapper. "How should I marry off my daughter when we find it difficult to survive on our meager earnings," she asked. She herself was given a dowry of Rs10,000. "At all times, dowry has been a huge burden on the parents of girls," she said.

#### ***Feticide***

While some women said they did not know about feticide or of scanning of the pregnant woman to determine the gender of the unborn baby, others pointed out that the doctors were

not supposed to reveal the gender of the fetus so how was feticide possible, they asked. The women insisted that they had not resorted to such measures and pointed out that every woman in the room had a daughter or two with the exception of a couple of women.

### ***Son preference***

When asked if sons were preferable over daughters, a few were vocal about the reasons why they were indeed preferable. Other women were equally vocal about why the sons were not preferable. Gouravva said if she had a son, it would be easier to get a loan as then the lender would feel assured that his loan would be repaid by the son if the father failed to repay. Other women said the hope and expectation that sons would care for their parents in their old age was a myth.

One respondent got angry at the question. “Do you have sons?” she asked the researcher in response to the question. When the researcher said that she had two daughters, the respondent said, “ah, that is why you are asking why sons were preferred.”

Asked if they thought that they would go to heaven if the son lit their pyre as is commonly believed, Kila Lakshmi said she did not agree. “Let daughters too light the pyre of her parents, why not?” she asked. Another woman ridiculed the belief saying while the parents were alive the sons do not care for them but on their death, they will perform huge ceremonies inviting the entire community to the feast, or put expensive and shining headstones on their graves, with their names written on them in big letters, she said.

Another woman explained that daughters were not unwanted in earlier days like nowadays because it was believed that “kanyadaan” (gifting of daughter: kanya being daughter and daan being gift or charity) was one of the several “daans” that were supposed to put the individual who did all or some of the daans, on the pathway to Heaven. The practice of Kanyadaan is an essential ceremony of Hindu marriages.

Another woman voiced an opinion that was heard commonly during my interactions in the villages and cities. In earlier times, the number of girls born was fewer, so they were valued more but nowadays girls outnumbered boys, hence, their value had gone down and had given rise to dowry.

### ***No change in women's status***

Asked if the position of women in the household had improved in modern times compared to earlier times, the consensus was that it was not very different. Then, men would tap the toddy trees; women would sell the toddy and hand over the money to the men. Now too it is the same: Women earn while working at daily wage labor and men take their earnings. A younger woman said there was indeed an improvement in women’s position even though it was not very much. “We have more freedom than what our mothers had,” she said. Another woman cited a common saying in Telugu that glorified the role of man’s effort and demeaned that of the woman. “If a woman makes the effort (and earns), it is worthless; when a man makes the effort, then it is Moksh (redemption)” (“Aadadi chesthe, adugu antuthadi; mogodu chesthe moksham”).

The women had no issues of belonging to the toddy tapping caste. Toddy was a health drink; earlier it was called “God’s own drink,” they pointed out. It gave them the means of survival so how could they feel bad for belonging to the Goud caste?

### ***Alcoholism***

When the researcher raised the issue of men’s addiction to liquor, the room literally exploded with the women’s anger. Traditionally, the Goud community was prohibited from

drinking liquor as it was considered Lakshmi, the goddess of good fortune, as liquor gave them a livelihood. Also logically, if the men consumed their only means of livelihood, how would the family survive? Besides, if they drink and climb trees to tap toddy, they could fall from the tree and die or get grievously injured. However, nowadays while the men did not drink the prohibited toddy, they consumed the “modern” liquor, the Indian Manufactured Foreign Liquor (IMFL) that is marketed by “wine shops.” “Please get those shops closed. If you do, we will touch your feet in gratitude,” said the women. Let the government ban the wine shops, we will not ask for anything more, they said. While gudumba (a locally distilled drink, mostly done as cottage industry mainly by the tribals) is banned why are the wine shops open from dawn to dusk, they asked. The men spend all their wages on the drink, they get violent, they get into debt to feed their addiction, even sometimes selling off household stuff to raise the money for their drink; they do not contribute any of their earnings to the upkeep of the family with the result that women go to bed hungry after feeding the children as there is nothing for them to eat after the children are done. “Our men live on liquor, nothing else,” they said. “Please do this one thing for us,” they begged. “Please close down all the wine shops. Take away all that you give us including cheap rice. We don’t want anything. We will consider you our god if you do this. We will not ask anything more of you ever,” they said addressing the government.

### **Summary and conclusion**

A rather stark picture of OBC women emerges that has a few patches of hope. The experience of interacting with the women and community leaders of the four most backward castes of Nayi Brahmin (barber community) and Rajaka (washer community), Kuruma (shepherd community) and Goud (toddy-tapping community) was both disheartening and inspiring. Disheartening because women have little education, low income and little or no income-earning opportunities outside their traditional occupations or the occupation in which they are engaged in. Almost none have crossed the boundary to try their hand at earning a livelihood in non-traditional areas. They are also victims of domestic violence, victims of alcoholic husbands and are deserted or abandoned in their old age. The picture is uniform; the difference, if any, between women of the four castes studied, is negligible. The OBC woman emerges as unequal in her home, supporting the family with her meagre earnings, leading to an insecure and precarious existence.

Preference for sons is prevalent due to both traditional social reasons and economic reasons. Moneylenders easily lend money to a father who has a son since the responsibility of repaying the loan if the father defaults would devolve on the son. No daughter is expected to repay her father’s loans; so, for a family that has only daughters it is difficult to raise loans from private sources.

There is a very clear differential in education for sons and daughters. Invariably, the son gets an English-medium education in private schools that charge huge amounts as fees while daughters are sent to government schools that teach in Telugu-medium for almost no fees. They have high ambitions for the son’s career and status in life whereas the only ambition for the daughter is to get her married.

Dowry and marriage expenses that are involved in getting the daughters married is the major factor that contributes to the undesirability of having a daughter. Women of all communities were aware of the modern medical technique of sex selection although they denied that it was resorted to in their community. That feticide is resorted to in almost all the communities

especially in the urbanizing environments, is an open secret. Since it is illegal, no-one admits it. However, the community leaders informally admit to it, saying it was prevalent not just in their community but was resorted to across castes, thus trying to absolve their community by pointing out that everybody was doing it, not them alone.

A bane of the women's lives was the widespread alcoholism among their men. Women of every caste pleaded for banning liquor to save their families. They said that in return for a ban on liquor, they were willing to forego all the benefits that the government gives them. As one woman pointed out, while water and milk are available at particular times of the day and irregularly, liquor is available at all hours every single day.

The women across the castes were against love and inter-caste marriages of their children. The caste identity remains deeply and firmly entrenched in the women.

The position of the single and old women is pathetic with no community or governmental intervention to assure them of security and dignity. While the old age pension given by the government is to an extent a relief, often the old are deserted by their sons and live with bitterness.

However, there are several bright spots of women fighting for their rights in the family, of struggling hard to educate their children to get out of the rut of poverty, of women encouraging their daughters to study and to be independent so that the history of women being powerless would not be repeated.

Caste associations and community leaders are aware that the women's position needs to be improved but whatever efforts they make to empower them or help them, they are all within the parameters of family, domesticity, and in their roles as housewife, mother and wife.

Exclusion, an inferior position and a marginalized existence are facts of life for the women, both outside and within their homes. Their empowerment is a long way off. They get little help from the society around them, have very little or no education and wage a daily struggle for existence. They have neither the time nor energy nor enthusiasm for any fight since their entire life is spent in trying to survive and support their families.

Modernization has helped in ensuring that the girls are sent to school, even if it is to a government school; marriage is delayed by five to six years, from the previous generation to the present one. This is of some help to the young girl to mature, both emotionally and physically to be able to face marriage and all the complications it involves. Modernization, however, has not made any impact on caste identity and association. Inter-caste marriage is a no-no and women will not brook any straying either by daughter or son. With the exception of Rajakas, women of the other three communities no longer practice the caste occupation, mainly due to living in an urban area that did not facilitate continuing with the caste occupation.

Women of the OBCs are the most excluded among the excluded communities. They are excluded from education, decision-making and equality in the house although they contribute in no small way to the family in terms of income. The traditional inferior position of women in the home has not improved in any significant manner.

There is no difference across the castes, either of the status of women, in the position of the girls, desirability for sons, the demand for dowry, limited education for girls and the financial insecurity that women face. Similarly, irrespective of caste, women experience havoc caused by alcoholism among their men. Thus, women of the OBCs face huge odds daily and encounter entrenched inequality in every sphere of life.

**Here are profiles of two women of the OBC communities who have shown a fighting spirit not merely to survive but to give a better future to their children.**

### **Padma: She will overcome**

Padma is a typical working woman. When we saw her at the dhobi ghat in Nizamabad one March afternoon, she had apparently finished her first round of washing the dirty linen collected from the hospital. Her gaunt, emaciated dark face was glistening with sweat, the faded T-shirt she wore over her saree was clinging to her, wet with the combination of sweat and water splashed on her from washing the clothes. Ten minutes into the conversation, it was clear here was no ordinary woman.

Padma and her husband Mallesh work for five hospitals which means washing and drying for eight hours. They deliver the wash to the hospital at the end of the day and reach home at around 8 in the night. Then, after dinner, starts another shift of work, of ironing clothes. They own two pressing irons fired by coal. Mallesh does the ironing until about midnight and then calls it a day. Padma continues for another two hours at least before turning in. The next day begins with rounds to hospitals picking up the dirty linen. Thus begins another long shift, and another day of the seven-day working week.

Padma rarely rests or takes any time off. “No, there’s no rest for me. How can we rest? If we rest, how will our children improve their life? Our desire is to see them happy. Our hope is that our children will have a life like the other children, studying well, earning well, living well,” she says.

She’s a workaholic alright. In her words: “I never go to temple or take time off to celebrate a festival. There is no Sunday for me. I never watch a movie, especially in a theatre. It costs Rs500, an amount which will get me a (LPG) gas cylinder that will last me two months. Our life revolves around kunda (cooking pot) and banda (washing stone), she says.

Padma works hard and saves harder. “I save every paisa I can. I admit I am better off than most of my family and caste people. Our hard work has paid off. I feel satisfied. I am happy,” she said. The biggest happiness in her life is her three children, two sons and a daughter. All married and “settled”? They have given her grandchildren, completing her life? No, no, she protests. They are still young. They are studying. One son is studying M Tech. She smiles at our surprise. Another son is studying B Tech. And daughter, we asked. She is studying MBBS, she said completing our shock. She named a well-known college in Hyderabad and left our mouths hanging wide open. All of them got good ranks in EAMCET (entrance exam for professional courses) and got free seats, she said with pride. But it would be costing her a fortune to finance their fees and stay in Hyderabad. “Our earnings might be less but our hope flies high in the sky,” she said quoting a Telugu saying, a typical trait of people of the region who mouth a saying at the drop of a hat to make their point.

What dreams she has for her children? She wants them to get good jobs and should be respected in society, she said. That is very important. Then, they should be able to help others who are less fortunate than they, she said.

What lessons can one take from her life? Padma spouted yet another saying: If you make hard work your weapon, then success will be your slave.

Does she regret that she cannot read and write? “Definitely I feel bad. I feel like going to school and learning ... even my children ask why didn’t you study? What to do ... But I tell

them that precisely because I couldn't study, I want them to go higher and higher in their studies," she said.

Padma is the leader of her self-help group in her locality, but her articulation is not due to that, she corrects us. "If there are people to listen to our problems, why will our tongues be tied? Without meaning to or wanting to, our words come out pouring from the bottom of our heart when there are people to listen to us with their heart," she said.

So does Padma nurture any dreams for herself, once her role in equipping her children to achieve their dreams is over? Yes, she came out hesitantly. I want to help old people, those who are thrown out of their homes, deserted by their children. We see them all around us. It happens in front of us all the time. They get totally helpless as they get older and children abandon them as they see them as a burden. One of these days I want to start a place where I can take care of such people, said Padma. Amen to that!

### **Bhagyalakshmi, the woman who erased gender boundaries**

Barkai Bhagyalakshmi is one of the very few women graduates of the community and also is the first woman ration shop-dealer of the community and among very few such women in Nizamabad. She is one of the ten women ration shop owners out of about 100 such dealers in the city. She is also a single mother who has got both her daughters educated up to college. While one completed B Tech and now lives in California, USA, the other started and runs a women's wear store in Nizamabad with the help of her husband's investment. Having mentored her daughters, Bhagya now is the anchor of her daughter-in-law, encouraging her to take up job. Her son is a businessman.

Bhagya admits that her life shows that a woman can change the course of her own life and help her children to become strong people if she is determined to change. She attributes her mental strength to her mother who was a business-woman, dealing in chilies, a cash crop of the district, who brought up 12 children. She believes that men should support the women. "My husband helped in getting me the ration shop and, it became my life," she said. Her husband was a good man but addicted to liquor. He died of jaundice about 15 years ago when she was in her 40s.

Bhagya did various home-based piece-rated jobs of tailoring to run her household since her husband did not earn nor contribute anything to the upkeep of the family. At times, she cursed her fate for marrying such a man. She got work from tailors to do the finishing tasks of hemming, stitching buttons, hooks and so on. Later she ran a small business from home, stitching petticoats and supplying them to readymade stores that sold them. Her children helped her in her work. She would also prepare spiced peanuts and supply them to the local toddy shop which sold them to customers along with the drinks, as a snack.

Born and brought up in Nizamabad, she was married off when a teen, as was the custom in the community. Her husband was a good man, of helping nature. He was associated with political leaders and had plenty of awareness. It was his idea that she apply for a ration shop when in 1994 the government implemented a scheme to give a means of livelihood to educated unemployed women. However, he was jailed for an issue she did not discuss, and it was around this time that she decided to study further, and she became one of the first woman graduates in her community. She is settled today, having her own house, running a ration shop that is considered "big" as it has 600-odd ration cards. She is known as an honest ration shop dealer who does not harass the cardholders or deprive them of their share and sell it in the black market as it happens in most ration shops. In fact, she even gives out free rations to old people. She donated Rs50,000 to the community's Sangam that is involved in the welfare of the community.

She believes that it is not difficult to pick up things that one doesn't know or hasn't done. Just seeing the work being done is enough to learn, she said. This learning has to be backed by hard work. Women have to revolt, or they will not be allowed to grow as individuals, she said. If you don't revolt, you won't know what life is or can be. Her daughter who was present, said she her mother had learnt to be courageous from her mother who in turn, learnt from her mom. However, the men should support women in their efforts to get empowered in the manner in which her husband helped her and the manner in which her son-in-law helped her daughter to complete post-graduation and encouraged her to work in a school.

Bhagya says her son tries to persuade her to stop working saying she should now relax considering she had struggled all through her life. However, there's no question of retirement as running her ration shop gives her a sense of satisfaction. She feels very relaxed now that her life has stabilized, and she has no worries relating to finances

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# 26

## THE NOMADIC AND SEMI-NOMADIC COMMUNITIES OF TELANGANA

### A ground report

*Akhileshwari Ramagoud and Simhadri Somanaboina*

#### **Introduction: Status of the nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes**

There are an estimated 150 million people in India who are nomadic and semi-nomadic, belonging to 1,500 tribes and are found across the country. The number of De-notified Tribal Communities or DNTs is put at 198. Since there are no authentic estimates of the nomadic and semi-nomadic people the Renke Commission worked out the estimated population based on the 1931 census (Renke 2008). Due to various reasons, some of these tribes have been included in the list of Scheduled Castes (SCs), some in the Scheduled Tribes (STs), and yet others in Other Backward Classes (OBCs). There are many more tribes that do not figure in any list (Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment 2014).

The Balkrishna Sidram Renke Commission (2008) and Bhiku Ramji Idate Commission on Denotified, Nomadic and Semi-nomadic tribes (2018) revealed that even after independence, these tribes continue to lag behind in literacy, housing, employment and living conditions. It also revealed that 89 percent of DNT communities and 98 percent of all the nomadic and semi-nomadic communities did not own any land (Raj 2019).

The Renke Commission (2008) highlighted the fact that 50 percent of DNTs did not possess documents such as a voter identity card, Aadhar and ration card. Almost none among them owned any land, the percentage of the landless being 98 percent (Swamy 2019). Nine years later, in 2017, the Idate Commission report revealed that nothing changed in a decade. The De-notified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Tribes remained the most neglected, marginalized and economically and socially deprived communities. These communities differ greatly on the scale of deprivation. Most of them have been living a life of destitution for generations, and continue to do so with an uncertain and gloomy future. From an unsmiling childhood, they step into tearful old age. Their adult life is too short to make any perceptible difference to their future savings and livelihood. Poor health adversely affects their longevity. Hunted by all—from common masses to law-enforcers—they lead a precarious existence, bereft of the rights that are bestowed upon the legitimate citizens of the nation. In a nutshell, they are citizens who are yet to be conferred with the rights of citizenship (Idate 2017).

While all of them suffer from exclusion, poverty, illiteracy, the DNTs suffer the additional stigma of being branded as a criminal from birth or belonging to “criminal tribes.” The colonial rulers brought about the law, the Criminal Tribes Act in 1871, which applied to about 150 tribes, attributing “criminal tendencies,” to an entire people. The law branded hundreds of wandering castes and entire communities as “hereditary criminals.” Overnight, people were turned into suspects, placed under police watch and even restricted to “settlements.” The law gave the police wide powers to arrest, control, monitor their movements and even kill them. The Act stipulated that members of the communities “notified” under the law would need to register with the police. In several instances, they were confined to “settlements” and used as slaves in various colonial industries and construction works. The Act gave sweeping powers to the colonial police to arrest, extort and even kill the people of these tribes.

Although they were traditionally accepted by society, the colonial rulers were suspicious of them since being on the move constantly the nomadic communities were difficult to bring under their control. Also, since these communities lived by their wits in the forests, they had cultivated an independence that the colonial rulers found intolerable. A traditional people who took on the uncertainties of living in the wild, who encountered danger to their lives regularly, hunted down wild animals and roamed the unknown forests to collect wild fruit, seeds, roots and leaves for their healing capabilities, were turned into vulnerable people, alienated from the people in villages who had supported them, and rendered helpless and put at the mercy of the state and police. Thus, a large number of Indian citizens was deprived of traditional sources of livelihood, made suspect in the eyes of the society and alienated. Their suffering and persecution continued for almost a century, inflicting incalculable damage on them.

The Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) was revised in 1911 and in 1924. After independence, the government of India, realizing that the CTA was a shameful colonial legacy, repealed it on August 31, 1952. Tribes that were “notified” thus became “de-notified.”<sup>1</sup> However, the government did not rehabilitate the de-notified tribes or take any measures to ensure that they made a steady livelihood and led a life of dignity. A few years later, the government brought about the Habitual Offenders Act which was a replica of the colonial legislation with a few minor changes. Over the next few years, almost all the Indian states adopted their own versions of the Habitual Offenders Act.

The Habitual Offenders Act, 1952, retained provisions of the CTA such as registration of the tribes, restrictions on their movement, and incarceration in “corrective settlements” earmarked for “habitual offenders.” It describes a “habitual offender” as one who has been a victim of subjective and objective influences and has manifested a set practice in crime and present a danger to the society in which they live (Kannan 2007). The police continue to use the law against the nomadic and de-notified communities.

The bias of the colonial rulers against the nomadic people continued to be reflected in the new Indian law as can be seen from the provision that asked the government while exercising its power to restrict the movement of the nomadic people to consider whether a person’s occupation was “conducive to an honest and settled way of life ... (and) not merely a pretence for the purpose of facilitating commission of offences” (Kannan 2007). The result has been that even today the police routinely use the Habitual Offenders Act to arrest, harass and jail the members of these communities whenever a crime is committed, on mere suspicion.

The listing of the DNTs under the Habitual Offender’s Act also negates the principle of the criminal justice system that presumes a person to be innocent until proven guilty. There have been demands from several organizations and activists that the Habitual Offenders Act be repealed. The DNTs suffered such injustice that it prompted the National Human Rights Commission in February 2000, to recommend that the Habitual Offenders Act be repealed

(Kannan 2007). The plight of the DNTs attracted the notice of the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination which said that the Habitual Offender's Act negated the universally proclaimed principle that "all human beings are born free and equal." In its 70th session in March 2007, the committee recommended the repeal of the Act.

The Committee is concerned that the so-called denotified and nomadic tribes, which were listed for their alleged 'criminal tendencies' under the former Criminal Tribes Act (1871), continue to be stigmatised under the Habitual Offenders Act ... The Committee recommends that the State to repeal the Habitual Offenders Act and effectively rehabilitate the denotified and nomadic tribes concerned.<sup>2</sup>

To date the issue remains unresolved although governments have consistently promised to repeal it but failed to follow through. The stereotyping of the nomadic people as criminally minded persists. This legacy of the colonial rulers has proved disastrous for these people as they face police suspicion and excesses, they are denied human rights and suffer ostracism and exclusion by society.

### **Our study on DNTs in Telangana**

Since most of the DNTs in Telangana State are included in the BC "A" category of the OBCs list, they come under the purview of our project to study and analyze the status, issues and problems of the OBCs. As part of the study, we held meetings with a cross-section of the various communities of the DNTs, had focused discussions with their leaders and specifically spoke to women and youth of these communities to get an understanding of their situation and concerns. We also had focused discussions with leaders and members of the associations of DNTs. We visited two nomadic communities in Nalgonda district in Telangana to get an idea of their living conditions. Meetings were organized with both leaders and people of different communities in Hyderabad, Nalgonda and Mahbubnagar districts where a substantial number of DNT communities are found. Some of these communities have turned semi-nomadic while others have settled down. The communities we interacted with were Mondi, Mandula, Dommara and Fakir. The last group is the only Muslim group among the nomadic communities. It is a unique community that predominantly Islamic but worships Hindu gods, and is rooted in the local culture and takes names that are a mix of Islamic and Hindu names. The Fakirs face the same problems as the other nomadic communities: they live in utter poverty, face social ostracism, and live on the margins of the society.

What we saw and heard left us discouraged that even 73 years after independence, there are communities that live in subhuman conditions, communities that are still targeted by the police as "criminals" as they have not been able to live down the calumny imposed on them by the colonial rulers, communities that are stigmatized as thieves, sex workers, beggars and pimps. Humiliation and abuse are a daily experience for them. One of the biggest injustices that the Indian state has done is to the DNTs. Its efforts to mainstream the DNTs, rehabilitate and accept as equal citizens have been both insufficient and ineffective. There are several communities that have no ration card as they do not have a permanent dwelling since they continue with their nomadic lifestyle.

The DNTs' traditional skills and knowledge like storytelling, treating various ailments with herbs, roots and leaves, entertaining people with their tricks, and so on are either destroyed or are not in use as they do not give them a livelihood as earlier. Almost daily, they face the challenge of survival. They are not allowed to mix with the mainstream society and therefore, live on the margins of the village. They are looked upon with suspicion and are ill-treated.

According to a leader of the DNTs, almost all the beggars in urban areas belong to the DNTs. Begging is a major activity of the children. Child marriage is widely prevalent as is illiteracy and unemployment. Domestic violence is common. A tradition that has a vice-like grip on these people is the traditional system of justice, rendered by the elders of the community which is often arbitrary, cruel and a carryover of the practices of the dark ages.

Since most of the names of the various nomadic communities are commonly used as abuse words by the mainstream society to indicate contempt, lowliness, lack of morals, some of them have adopted a different name while others are considering changing the name of the community. For instance, the Picchakuntla community has changed its name to Vamshiraj since the ancient name evoked contempt. They have taken the cue from “low” caste groups of the OBCs who have given up the traditional names of their castes and have adopted Sanskritized names as a step to shake off the stigma of low status associated with their caste. For instance, names such as Rajaka, Nayi Brahmin, Yadav and Padmashali are now in common use for communities of washer people, barbers, shepherds/cowherds and weavers.

With the nomadic communities living literally as outcasts of the society, and with their numbers being too small individually as communities to be wooed as “votebanks” by the political parties, the voice of the communities has remained unheard with no-one to raise their issues either in the society, with the government or in political parties. Venkatnarayan is one of the handful nomadic men to have served in the government. He is a retired as Sub Inspector from the Andhra Pradesh police. He is also the president of Telangana Sanchara Jatula Sangam (Association of Telangana Nomadic People), an umbrella organization of the DNTs. He pointed out that so far there has been no sarpanch from the Gangireddu community and there has been only one sarpanch from the Picchakuntla or Vamshiraj community. Several communities have either had no representation in any elected posts so far or have had minimal representation in posts from village level onwards. The neglect by the (then united) Andhra Pradesh government of issues concerning the most backward among the OBCs, namely the DNTs, was clear from its decision to close down the DNT hostel run by the Social Welfare Department in Langar Houz area in Hyderabad city for lack of funds apart from students.

These people are the orphans of the society who are nobody’s concern, either of the state government or the central government or even the civil society organizations. They remain marginalized and invisibilized, non-existent for all purposes, in the eyes of society and the government. These are the non-people of our country.

Our project has tried in a small way to focus on some of these communities. We opted for a descriptive mode of presentation to capture the dire situation of their lives, in their words.

### **The Mondi community of Pochampally town, Telangana**

The Mondi people are at the lowest rung of the caste hierarchy, occupying a status lower than the SCs. They were condemned by the caste logic (or illogic) to live by begging. Theirs is a begging caste. They live at the mercy of the rest of society. If people are generous, they may get to eat left-overs once a day. They feel lucky if they get food even that has gone bad. The worst days are when they do not get to eat anything. Uncertainty marks their life, every single day that they live.

The Mondi people shared their woes at a meeting in Pochampally in Nalgonda district of Telangana on November 15, 2014, that was organized by the research team of the project. The team later visited the houses of the Mondi people. The 20-odd families of the Mondi people live on a plot of land of about 200 yards from the outskirts of the town, away from the mainstream. The land is undeveloped; it has no access road; it has no electricity connection or a water con-

nection. Their “houses” are mere shelters providing nothing more than protection from rain and sun. There is only one brick structure among the temporary structures that are made from discarded stuff. These “huts” comprise a plastic sheet serving as the roof which is held up by four dried up trunks of palm trees. Torn sarees, tattered plastic sheets and so on serve as walls. Discarded plastic sacks serve multiple purposes such as bedsheets and mats. They literally live under the sky, cooking and eating and sleeping in the open. All their possessions were retrieved from waste or garbage dumps. Except for the dishes used for cooking and eating, everything else is battered, damaged, misshapen, broken, rusted, frayed and torn. They get water for general use from a distance, from a public tap that supplies groundwater that is not fit for drinking. They buy water for drinking at Rs5 per pot. On average, a family buys two pots a day. They have a bath once a week as they have no ready access to water sufficient to meet the needs of a family. They get water from the borewell once in three days. If they had to get water daily, then they would not be able to earn or beg to fill their stomachs.

Although the community came to Pochampally 30 years ago, it acquired the land only four years ago. The families got together to buy the land and stay together as they were driven out from village after village or thrown out from the vacant land where they put up temporary shelters. Their pleas to the government and elected representatives to allot them land fell on deaf ears. Tired of being abused and driven out of their makeshift shelters, the Mondi people decided to pool money and buy land and pitch their huts and other temporary structures so that they could live without fear of being hounded out.

### **A life of humiliation and abuse**

The Mondibanda or Mondivarlu community is listed in the BC “A” group of both the state and central lists of Backward Classes, meaning they are among the most backward of all the backwards. Their population is about 25,000 and the Mondi people are found in all the districts of the erstwhile united Andhra Pradesh state. These families of Pochampally continue to beg for a living. Taking begging bowls, they go from village to village and collect left over food, foodgrains and even money if they are lucky. Often, they get mere “ganji,” that is the excess water in which rice is cooked. The better-off households throw it away while for the poor household it is the only source of sustenance for the entire family. They stay in each village for a few days so that they can collect enough for the family and then return to Pochampally. “We live a life of humiliation and abuse,” said a young Mondi woman. People give food but also abuse them for begging, saying they are lazy people, seeking an easy life. “‘Why don’t you work,’ they ask us,” said the young woman. “‘We do work but our earnings don’t fill our stomachs and of our children. Besides, our caste is a begging caste. Our elders told us that our work is to beg so what can we do?’ she asked.

The older generation did not ever enter a school, while some of the youth have studied up to primary school or a little more. Nowadays, most children go to the government school but there are quite a few who do not. A huge obstacle is the lack of a caste certificate. None of them has a caste certificate as the officials make them run from pillar to post. “They ask in which category our Mondi caste is included? How can we answer them when we ourselves don’t know to which category we belong?” asked one of the men in the meeting. The younger men with children would like to see that their children get educated. Nanduri Yadagiri, a young father of a baby girl, said, “We realize that we are like this because we have no education. We want to change that and make sure our children don’t suffer like we do.”

None of them has an Aadhar card; a few have ration cards. Most have neither card. Despite applying at least five times, they still have not got the card, said one of those who does not have

a ration card. Interestingly, almost all have voter identity cards since apparently it is in the interest of the political class to ensure that everybody gets the card to enable them to cast their vote. A woman pointed out that when politicians come to their homes during elections seeking their vote, they cover their noses unable to bear the stink around which the families live. “They ask us to vote for them but on getting elected they do not bother to meet any of our demands. Politicians’ promises are mere words; they mean nothing,” she said. Asked what the community would like the elected representative to help them with, she said housing was their first priority.

The youngsters in the community wanted their community to be removed from the BC “A” category and included in the SC category as they are lower than the SCs in the caste hierarchy. Hence, their situation is among the worst. They believe that as SCs they would be eligible for some benefits as they see only SCs and the weavers’ community get government benefits such as houses (Pochampally is a nationally known center for handloom weaving). Despite their situation being the worst, the Mondi people have been ignored by the government. Even when they have pleaded for some benefits such as electricity to their habitation, the administration has not responded. These families gave several representations to the local administration “We went again and again to the electricity offices, but they did nothing. We have given up in frustration and continue living in darkness,” said a woman. “Our lives only are dark lives, so it is not a big deal that our nights are dark,” she said. Yadagiri said their nights were fearful especially for those who have children. “We sleep in fear because we have children. There are snakes around and we worry that they will bite our babies in the night,” he said. Fear is a constant in the nights for this community.

A typical day for the community goes like this: The younger men go for daily wage labor; the adolescent boys graze the sheep and goats for a small wage. The older men beg from house to house. The women carrying their infants in arms, beg in the mornings. After eating whatever they get, they set out to collect recyclable waste, especially plastic. They earn on average Rs50 a day that they spend to feed the family. “We don’t know what a full stomach is because there is never enough food to eat,” said Yadamma. With rice costing Rs20–30 per kilogram, they could not afford to eat even once a day, she said. There is no question of eating dal or vegetables. Their meal is mostly rice mixed with a paste of dry red chillies and salt, a paste that they make on a daily basis.

Very often the Mondi families run into problems with the municipal authorities who object to the rearing of pigs which is a traditional occupation of their caste. Each family rears a couple of pigs; each pig fetched Rs200–300 in the market which is like a fortune to an average family. But with the municipal authorities confiscating the pigs because they reportedly spread infectious diseases, even this means of livelihood has been snatched away from the Mondi people.

The Mondi women have no access to any benefits such as self-help groups (SHGs) since they have no regular income or have money to spare to save to become members of the SHGs. The women unanimously said that the men do not help in the upkeep of the family. “We do all the work and spend our earnings on the family. Their kind is like that only,” said an aged Nanduri Yellamma, speaking of the men of her community.

Marriage is a simple and uncomplicated event, with the groom tying “*pustelu*” or mangalsutra to the bride and putting rings on her toes (“*mattelu*”), and the two families meeting their own expenses for the event. However, of late, the system of “*katnam*” or dowry that is rampant in society has spread to their community too with the result that girls are remaining unmarried as their families are unable to afford the dowry. There are four such girls in the 20-odd Mondi families of Pochampally.

Such is the dire situation of the Mondi people that they do not have a graveyard to bury their dead. A few months ago when an old man died they “buried” him in the stream a few

miles away as no one in the village would allow them to bury him in their graveyards. “Give us land at least for our graves. Let us have some dignity in death even if we do not live in dignity,” said Yadamma.

### **Children not allowed into schools**

At a meeting held in Pochampally town in Nalgonda District, with the representatives of the DNT communities of Mondi and Mandula (the traditional doctors, “mandu” meaning medicine in Telugu), they revealed that they had never before, in their lived memory seen a meeting called to discuss their problems. This was the first-ever meeting they were attending where their problems were being discussed, they said.

Indira, a young mother of the Mondi caste, said her people too, like everybody, had aspirations for their children to get an education and make their lives but their children are not allowed into schools as they are dirty and smelly. “We can have a bath only once a week because we don’t have water. We live like animals,” she said. This was borne out during our visit to their “colony” of huts and makeshift tents outside the town. Lack of water does not allow them to have a bath while the utter poverty in which they live does not allow them to change their clothes with any regularity. The children and women smell, such is their situation.

Chennaiah, belonging to the Mondi caste, from Mahbubnagar, is a schoolteacher, one of the rare educated and employed persons of the community. He narrated a story that has been handed down by generations of how the Mondi people turned nomadic. It goes like this: In olden days, the Mondi people were employed as security guards by wealthy people. One of the men, who was employed to guard a mango orchard, was caught stealing a mango. His plea that his wife was pregnant and felt a desperate desire to eat a mango fell on deaf ears (a pregnant woman’s longing for food is said to be natural and should be indulged in, according to tradition). Not only was the young man punished but the entire community was thrown out of employment and banished from the city. That is how they became nomadic.

### **The Mandula community of Ibrahimpatnam in Ranga Reddy district**

The Mandula people, as the name suggests, deal in traditional medicines (*mandu* in Telugu means medicine, and Mandula is “people of medicine”). They were the doctors of old, making medicines/cures from herbs, roots and leaves for common ailments and selling them, going from village to village. If they did not move from one habitation to another they would not be able to sell enough of their medicines and cures to make a basic living. The community believes their “caste” has been in existence since the existence of man. The community has identified 360 diseases/disorders/ailments that affect people which they claim can treat with medicines, powders and potions made from roots, trees, fruits, berries, seeds and even from the blood, flesh and bones of animals and birds. Interestingly, in a Mandula household, both the husband and wife practice the profession, with the husband treating men and the wife treating women, especially for those health issues that are typical to a woman and those that a patient cannot share with a male, not even a doctor.

The Mandula people would travel in small groups and live about one kilometer from the village, putting up their temporary accommodation in dried up ponds or fields that had been harvested and were lying unused. Often, they chose an area from where they could access four or five villages, making it easy for them to access more patients, and thus make a better livelihood. They would announce their arrival in the village by blowing a mini trumpet-like thing that they fashioned out of dried-up pumpkins. They would also sell these trumpets as a side

business which were highly popular with children. Another side business was to catch snakes, defang them, put them in baskets that the women wove, and take them from village to village and allow a peep into the basket especially by curious and fascinated children, all for a price, that was paid in kind. Subsequently, they began to charge a small amount of money for this “show.”

The families would literally sleep under the sky; while the adults slept on makeshift beds, the children would sleep under the beds. The families invariably had donkeys which they used to transport their goods and sometimes, children too. They often sold the donkey’s milk as it was considered medicinal, and very often the medicinal powders they would prescribe would have to be dissolved in donkey’s milk and consumed for greater efficacy.

According to a story that has been passed down from several generations, the Mandula community was turned out of the city by a king of yore. Once, an epidemic was raging in the kingdom and the Mandula doctors were busy treating the people on a mass scale. Just then, the king’s son was bitten by a snake and the chief Mandula doctor, Mandula Mallaiah was summoned to treat him. He, however, got delayed as where was he was tied up taking care of a large number of patients due to the epidemic. Although he took some time to attend to the prince, he managed to save the prince. The king however was enraged and ordered Mallaiah to be put to death. Mallaiah’s wife fell on the king’s feet asking that his life be spared. The king relented and banished the family from his kingdom and ordered them to stay outside the town and come in only when their services were required.

### **Traditional occupation no longer in demand**

The Mandula people led a nomadic existence until about the 1970s, in Andhra Pradesh, according to Vaddapalli Gopal, President of the Mandula Sangam. (Telangana region was part of Andhra Pradesh then.) Since then, most of the community began to settle down and almost gave up the traditional occupation since their medicines were no longer in demand due to the growth of modern medicine. There are very few numbers of the community who continue to practice the traditional occupation and they are mostly found in Mahbubnagar, Nalgonda and Nizamabad districts. While the men have shifted to wage labor and to micro-business like selling plastic goods on footpaths, women sell knick-knacks and deal in household goods in return for used clothes which they sell to people who mend and repair the clothes and sell them as second-hand wares. The micro-business requires about Rs100,000 as an initial investment which fetches a daily income of Rs200–300 per couple. There are very minimal numbers of their caste people who are employed either in the private or public sector, no more than 25–30, in the two states of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh. Their exclusive habitations are found in most districts of Telangana. Invariably, 15–20 families stay together in a small community.

Gopal is one of the very few of his generation in the Mandula community who got an education. Gopal was the only one to be sent to school, out of four brothers and a sister. Along with him, his community people admitted 14 other children to the school for the first time. However, a kind of caste war was waged on them by the Reddy and Velama landlords in his village. He did not share his village name for the fear of giving away the identity of the landlords. The upper castes objected to the children of the nomadic people and the backward castes attending school. The upper castes resorted to all kinds of harassment to prevent the lower caste children from attending school. It began when Gopal was in the 10th class and continued for a few years. After two years of resistance, he quit studies after joining intermediate grade, unable to bear the harassment and the fear of violence.

Anjaiah, another Mandula, was from Ibrahimpatnam in Ranga Reddy district, said none of his people either owned a house or had a regular means of livelihood. Responding to a question

regarding a shared identity for all the OBCs, he asked who among the OBC people would recognize and accept such people as his as one of them? Besides, he said, most of his people had no time for issues such as identity; all their living hours were spent in struggling to eke out a livelihood. Several among the nomadic communities continued to beg for a living just as their fathers and forefathers had done. His caste had no identity, hence he too had no identity. Two other young Mandula men of Pochampally, Yadagiri and Ravi, spelt out their experiences. A common one was the blank looks they see on people's faces when they mention their community's name. Their caste and their people simply do not exist, not just for the common people, but even for the government officials, who are equally unfamiliar with their caste, they said.

The Mandula people, like all nomadic and semi-nomadic people, eat all kinds of animals and birds including cats, squirrels, foxes, crows, crocodiles and mongooses. They have unique ways of trapping and killing them. For instance, women make a powder of poisonous seeds, mix it with food and put it out in the open. Birds or rodents that eat it, die within minutes. The children are sent out to collect the dead animal and clean it. The adult men follow the birds as they fly away after eating the poisoned food. When the birds fall to the ground and die, the men pick them up and bring them home. The women then cook them and feed the family. At times the meat is eaten raw too, said Gopal. When on rare occasions there is an excess of meat, it is dried up, powdered and consumed after mixing it with chilli powder. They use animal fat to make oil to use it for their consumption and for medicinal use. Nothing goes to waste. They even trap crocodiles and drink their blood. How do they do it? Gopal refused to give details saying it was a secret belonging to the community and he could not share it.

### **Social customs of Mandula community**

Although a begging caste, the Mandula people traditionally were not allowed to beg from Mala, Madiga, Barber and Dhobi communities which meant that the Mandula community was considered higher in the traditional caste hierarchy than these castes. Increasingly, the gods and rituals of the Mandula people have become Hinduized and adopted some Brahminical values as well. For instance, although traditionally the Mandula women drank liquor without any stigma, now they prefer to drink it in the privacy of their hut rather than in the open as earlier. The men, or sometimes male children, are sent to buy the liquor for them.

Regarding marriage customs, interestingly, unlike in mainstream society, the groom bears all the expenses of the marriage. The bride is given "Oli" by her parents and the groom comes to the bride's home. After the "first night" he returns to his house with his bride. Widow remarriage is allowed in the Mandula community as it is among several nomadic, semi-nomadic and OBC people. But the value of a girl is less than that of a boy in this community too, as in any patriarchal system. When a baby girl is born, the parents gift Rs9 to the community elders. In the event of a boy, then the gift amount is Rs11, according to the custom.

Since superstition is rife within the community and there is a deep-seated belief in the existence of evil spirits, death rituals are done elaborately to please all the spirits. A bull is sacrificed, and a feast held on the 11th day after the death as part of rituals to appease the evil spirits.

### **Caste Panchayat, the bane of Mandula people**

The hold of the caste panchayat on the people is almost total. The caste elders have at least three weapons in their hands to maintain their control over the community. One, *kula bahishkarana*, or social boycott or excommunication from the community; two, practice of *pramanam*, an

extreme ritual that purportedly reveals the truth in the case of a person being accused of a crime or wrongdoing; three, impose *dandugulu*, or heavy fines on those who violate the set rules of the community. While social boycott and collecting fines is common, the ritual of *pramanam* has been almost discontinued. This method of “testing” the innocence of a person accused of a crime involved dipping a hand in boiling hot oil, or holding a red-hot iron rod, or bringing out a ring from the bottom of a container boiling hot oil. This system of justice was prevalent in all nomadic communities, but most have given it up. The last time a *pramanam* was held was in 1978, according to Gopal. There were reports of a woman in Buduga Jangam community put through the *pramanam* of bringing out a ring from hot oil.

Social boycott or “*bahishkaram*” is common for those who transgress the rules and traditions of the community. For instance, a man can be thrown out of the caste for marrying a woman of another caste. However, if he pays the fine imposed by the community elders that often runs into several thousand rupees, his transgression is forgiven, and he is accepted back into the community along with his wife. The money thus collected is spent on organizing a lavish party of feasting and drinking for the community elders and for a specified number of community people decided upon by the elders. “Our caste is very important for us; we have to be within our caste people or we will not have an identity or access to our friends and relatives,” said Gopal. For instance, his own son was excommunicated for a period of seven years for marrying outside his caste. The son wants to be back in the caste and hence, he is pressuring his father to help him pay the fine amount of Rs10,000–15,000 so that the community takes him back into its fold. His son, who sells mirrors on the roadside in the city for a living, cannot raise that kind of money; hence, he is pleading with his father to help him out.

As he narrates the plight of his community people, Gopal’s eyes brim with tears. He lists out the tragedy that is his people: They live on the roadside and die there; they can have a bath just once a week; they change their clothes twice a week; they oil their hair once a week instead of daily; the women keep begetting children although they are unable to feed those born earlier; most of the children beg on the streets; most of them have not seen inside a school. “We live in fear because whenever any crime takes place anywhere, we are the first suspects and the police take us (into custody). Are we seen as humans at all? What is this life of ours all about?” he asked in anguish. “We cannot afford the expenditure of private hospitals to treat our women and children if they fall ill; the government hospitals don’t allow us inside of the hospital; in the city, the police harass us; they clear us off the roads forcing us to move to another area again and again ... where should we go? How do we live? Is it not the government’s duty to take care of us?” he asked.

Asked what the needs of the community were, Gopal listed free education, from “LKG to PG,” that is, from kindergarten to university level, houses, medical facilities and bank loans to start small businesses. He said a huge injustice was done to the Mandula people by including them in the BC “A” list. Logically, since the community was dependent on the forest, and made a living from forest produce, they should have been included in the ST list. They pointed out that the V. Raghavaiah Commission for STs had indeed recommended that Mandula people be included in the ST list in response to their representation to the Commission in 1984 but evidently the community perhaps could not make out a strong enough case like the Nakkala community whose demand was accepted, and they were included in the ST list. The leaders expressed another fear. With the government adding castes to the BC “A” list and there being no increase in the share of 7 percent for this category, it meant that the Mandula people who are among the most backward of the backwards, stand little or no chance to benefit from the reservation either in education or jobs.

## Political marginalization

Politically too, the Mandula people have next to no representation in any elected posts. There is only one Mandula sarpanch in Karimnagar of the village called Mandulapalle or village of the Mandula people. The village had only one of its kind of hostel for children of nomadic communities but now that hostel has been converted into a Backward Class hostel. Gopal feels angry with the political parties. “They simply use us for votes; ask us to carry party flags and shout slogans for them but they do nothing for us,” he said. Like the colonial masters, the present political dispensations too exploit us, he said. At least before independence, they were free and the village communities recognized and appreciated their trade. Their groups would be allowed to stay in the village whenever they visited a village in an area designated for nomadic groups called “kacheri.” The nomadic visitors or “pardesi” (foreigner) as they were called, were both treated well and were safe in the village. Not so today. The community has been labeled as criminal and vagabond and is looked upon with suspicion wherever they go, whether in a village or a town or a city.

The Mandula people say they do not want political power; they simply want to be recognized as humans. Their present conditions of living and treatment at the hands of society does not qualify them as human beings. Their priority is to be seen as human beings. Until the time society begins to treat them as human beings and accepts them as equals, the Mandula people will continue to see themselves as less than human and inferior, they said.

## Social problems of the Mandula people

As for social problems of the community, there are many. Apart from superstitions that rule and even ruin their lives, girls and boys are married off early. Alcoholism is widespread as drinking begins early in life as it is a social custom in the community. Dowry has become a problem with girls' families having to pay Rs1 lakh to 1.5 lakhs while earlier the community practiced “kan-yashulkam” or bride price. The age at marriage has improved: for girls, it should not be younger than 18, and 20 for the boys. Earlier, the age of marriage for girls was 12–13 years and for boys 15–16 years. The community panchayat is supreme and dominates the private lives of the people. With more social interaction taking place, inter-caste marriages have increased. Unlike earlier when the community panchayat would impose heavy fines on a man if he married outside his caste, the panchayat has now banned the men of their community from marrying women of other castes. To escape discrimination and humiliation in cities and towns, the Mandula people claim to belong to another caste which is more acceptable socially.

According to Mandula Kula Sangam President Vadapalli Gopal, all the *sanchara jatulu* or nomadic tribes such as Erukula, Vamshiraj, Gangireddu, have fraternal relations between themselves. Inter-drinking is allowed but not inter-dining. Gopal is one of the few Mandula men who have made it in life and there are a handful more in the community like him. He had political ambitions, but they could not be fulfilled due to several reasons. He has studied the history of the *sanchara jatulu* and has been part of struggles for and of the Mandula community that he is counted among the influential persons of the community.

According to tradition, the *sanchara jatulu* were “aasrita” or dependent caste of the Yadavas which meant that whenever a nomadic group came visiting the village, the Yadavas had to take care of their food and shelter. They were considered “aada bidda” of the Yadavas, or the daughter, and hence, they were to be taken care of, loved and respected as they would a daughter.

The *sanchara jatulu*, apart from entertaining and treating people, also acted as couriers and historians as they went from village to village, communicating and sharing information. In many

ways, the *sanchara jatulu* were the keepers of the culture of the people, storehouses of creativity, skills and talent as they danced, sang, enacted, narrated, discovered new knowledge, safeguarded and perpetuated traditional wisdom and knowledge.

The nomadic people have a common language but it has fallen into disuse, with the mainstream language, Telugu, being adopted as their mother tongue. However, when they need to communicate among themselves without anyone else understanding them, they use their language as a code. Pig-rearing is the common activity of the nomadic people. With their traditional occupations falling upon bad times, most of the nomadic communities have found refuge in pig-rearing. There is a huge demand for quality pork in such states as Gujarat and Rajasthan and it has huge export potential. The community leaders believe that if the government helps them to take up pig-rearing on a commercial basis, it would go a long way in improving their economic conditions. However, in the past few years, the pigs reared by the nomadic communities have been targeted by municipal authorities to stop the spread of flu said to be caused by pigs. They were not paid any compensation for the pigs culled. Several Mandula men committed suicide out of despair when they lost their pigs as they could not bear the losses that ran into several thousand rupees, according to the community leaders.

### **Fakirs of Mahbubnagar district**

Fakirs are one of the nomadic communities who follow Islam. They figure at the bottom of the social hierarchy among the Muslims and are discriminated against, looked down upon and excluded. The population of Fakirs in Telangana State is six lakhs. Out of the 76 sects among Muslims, the Fakir are at the bottom and are considered as outcastes among the Muslims.

Mahbubnagar district in Telangana has the largest concentration of Fakirs with about 40,000. In Jadcherla town of Mahbubnagar district, the government allotted 67 yards of land to each of 100-odd families of Fakirs in 2009. The beneficiaries put up huts as they have no funds of their own nor have they any from the government to put up a pukka structure. There are another 100 families of other nomadic groups too in the colony. The colony is on wasteland, on top of a rocky hillock. There are no roads or power in the colony but there is a borewell that meets the water needs of the colony residents. The Fakirs opted for the wasteland as it is closer to the railway station and the bus stand which are two places that yield good earnings for the Fakirs who make a livelihood by begging and bestowing blessings on people. Perhaps, people who travel long distances in trains and buses need god's blessings to reach their destination safely and therefore, they generously give us alms in return for prayers and blessings, said one of the Fakirs.

There have been attempts to organize the community so that they could present their demands to the government as a body. As a result, the Fakir Hakkula Porata Samiti, or Struggle Committee for Rights of Fakirs has been set up. The inspiration came from a similar organization floated by the Madiga community of the SCs to fight for their rights way back in the 1990s. They say they want to "open government's eyes" to their plight. Although they are minorities and there is a Minority Corporation, their community has not gained from it in any way. The Fakirs have been moved from BC "A" where they had been originally placed along with several other nomadic communities, to the newly created category of BC "E," specifically for Muslims. But this has not generated any benefits to the Fakir community. They have no representation either in the government or any elected body even at the Panchayat level. There is no BC Muslim representative in the present Telangana government either.

### **“We want to quit begging”**

The community wants to give up begging and the semi-nomadic life they are leading today. A leader said: We feel ashamed to beg. We face humiliation all the time. Not only people don't give alms, they also insult us. We too want to live a life of respect. We want to quit begging but we don't know how to go about it. Since we are Sanchara Jati (nomadic people) we can sell small items of daily use in “jataras” (religious festivals) that are popular in rural areas. The government can perhaps give us funds, say Rs20,000–25,000 per couple so that we can set up a small business and earn our living in a respectable manner. Education and regular employment are scarce commodities in the community.

The Fakir Struggle Committee has put forth the demands of the community to the government that includes hostels for children's education, land to each Fakir family to take up agriculture, reservation in political posts, and the inclusion of the Fakir community in the SC category as “our situation is worse than that of the SCs,” say the leaders. Besides, being placed in Category “E” with the rest of the Muslim community was unfair to them as they, being the last in the social and economic terms within the Muslim community, cannot be expected to compete and win against the better-off fellow Muslims for educational and employment opportunities. The Fakirs, like other Dalit Muslims, believe that they have been given short shrift.

Such is the financial position of the average Fakir that they cannot attend meetings called by the community to discuss their common issues as most of them cannot afford the bus ticket both ways and to lose a day's earnings. The Fakir Struggle Committee has managed to organize a few Taluk level meetings but has no wherewithal to hold a state-level meeting. They invited officials to their Taluk-level meetings to hear their problems and presented memos to District Collectors. Their demands were voiced at state-level meetings too but these were part of the meetings organized by the rest of the DNTs.

Being based in Jadcherla (in Mahbubnagar district), the Fakir men find it easy to commute to Hyderabad daily by train as the journey is an hour's ride. Hyderabad is the preferred destination because of the potential of getting substantial income at the end of the day as they stand at various traffic lights and bestow Allah's blessings by sprinkling incense on live coal and fanning it to spread the sweet perfume of the incense which is a traditional way of blessing.

### **Precarious financial position**

Most of the Fakir men own mobile phones and a few have TV sets and motorbikes. But their financial situation is so fragile that the second-hand TV set they would have bought for Rs3,000 would be sooner or later mortgaged to the moneylender for Rs1,000. The situation of the Fakirs has changed marginally since his childhood days, said a community leader. Even today, they earn and live by the day, not sure when they would have the next meal. At no point, do we have Rs50 with us, he said. He recalled that when they were small, he and his siblings, all eight of them, would wait for their father to return from begging in the nearby town.

We would wait like fledglings in the nest, waiting for the parents to come and feed us. We would wait till late hours, sometimes even till midnight. We would wait and wait for him, with growling empty stomachs. And when he came, we would all crowd around him and greedily eat whatever he brought.

Drinking liquor was no big deal. In fact, as in other nomadic and semi-nomadic communities, the children share the drink with their parents. They also accompany the father on his begging

trips. Another community leader said a Fakir's life had only problems, while enjoyments of life were very few, one of which was drinking liquor and they drink hard, he admitted. The Fakir also suffers the stigma that other nomadic communities suffer from. For instance, whenever a theft takes place in the neighborhood, the cops come to their homes looking for the culprit as they, being nomadic, are the "eternal" suspects. He said the two places where the nomadic people are seen regularly are the police station and *kallu* or toddy "compound," an open place where several small liquor outlets sell and serve country liquor.

Jahangir Pasha, a leader of the Fakir community from Mahbubnagar, said the people belonging to the "beggar castes," that is, Fakir, Mondi, Mandula and Budubukka had many "firsts" to their credit. They always land first in police stations as the police pick them up for any or no reason; they take the first place in begging; they are first in drinking liquor and first in fighting among themselves. On a more serious note, he said there was a need for a federation of the various *Sanchara Jati* or wandering communities under which they should be given houses on a priority basis. They should be recognized as DNTs and their reservation quota increased to 12 percent from the present 7 percent.

### **Social status of Fakirs**

A unique feature of the Fakir community is that they follow Islam but also worship Hindu gods, adopt several Hindu rituals and take even Hindu names. There is one sect among the Fakirs that follows Hindu gods and gurus. They look up to Shiva, the Hindu god of destruction, as their protector and even follow the Hindu custom of not eating meat during the holy month of *Shravan* (a month in the Hindu calendar) during which the followers fast and abjure all non-vegetarian food.

A Fakir community leader said they were neither Hindu nor Muslim. In fact, they know more about Hinduism than Islam. The Fakir has learnt about the Quran but has neither seen it nor even held the Holy Book in his hand. No Fakir has ever gone on Haj. "Our heart longs to go on Haj but how can they afford it when we struggle to eat even once a day?" said a community leader. Muslims treat us worse than the Hindus, said another leader. The Muslims don't consider them as genuine Muslims; they don't accept them as Muslims. They discriminate against the Fakirs and consider them as "low" or even impure Muslims perhaps because they are not only influenced by Hinduism but also speak Telugu, the language of the Hindus, according to the leader. The situation of the senior citizens in the community is worse. An aged Fakir of Mahbubnagar said the elderly are mostly abandoned by the family. They live under trees or in temples or masjids as they are no longer useful to their families, he said. None of them get an old age pension from the state government.

### **Women and girl children of the Fakir community**

A community leader agreed that women get short shrift from men. "They don't have the luxuries that we men have. Ninety percent of us beat our wives and they bear with us. We deprive them of all their rights, I admit," he said. Unquestionably, women are looked down upon in their community. Yet 95 percent of households run on the earnings of women who sell knick-knacks or work as daily wage laborers, he said. There is negligible education among the women. The two things that occupy the women are their family and earning a livelihood. A few are members of the local SHGs and get loans. That is the only benefit the community gets, according to the community leader.

Asked about the discrimination girls of his community faced, the community leader admitted that while 70 percent of girls are sent to beg, 80 percent of boys are sent to school. Sometimes,

when a father falls short of earnings for his evening liquor session, he sends his daughter to beg so that he can buy liquor. At times, he beats her up if she does not earn enough. At other times, he even goes to the school if she is studying, brings her out and puts her to beg so that he gets his drink that day. According to another leader, at least 50 percent of the girls in Fakir families face such problems.

Typically, a girl is married off between 14–16 years of age as most parents feel she is a burden on them. They give the wrong age to show that she is an adult while the marriage is being registered by the Qazi in the local masjid. Dowry is common, ranging from Rs10,000–20,000. Earlier a meher, of Rs1,100 was common but that has become a mere nominal act while dowry, a non-Islamic practice borrowed from the Hindu society, has become the norm. Multiple marriages are common in the community. Also, they welcome the addition of children to the family as it means an extra pair of hands to beg and get home extra earnings.

A problem that the Fakirs face, like the rest of nomadic groups, is that now they cannot hunt for small forest/wild animals for food as they used to earlier. They would hunt and eat any animal they could catch or trap such as rabbits, jungle fowl, birds and so on. However, they have been put on notice by the forest officials not to kill animals in the forest and hence, a traditional source of sustenance has now been snatched from them.

## **Meeting with nomadic communities of Mahbubnagar district**

### ***Surabhi artistes in the doldrums***

A meeting was organized with different nomadic communities in Mahbubnagar town since Mahbubnagar district is home to a large number of nomadic people. The town is known for artistes known as the Surabhi who make puppets, put on puppet shows and plays. Even though they are a class by themselves and are well-known, often engaged by the government to promote its programs or the region's culture, they have remained neglected. A large number of Surabhi artistes have settled down in Mahbubnagar town. Their situation was summed up by a 66-year-old Surabhi artiste A. Krishnaiah who said even though they are treated as professionals they had no option but to live as beggars. Nothing had changed for the better for the community. Similar sentiments were echoed by Mogulaiah, an aged man claiming to be about 70 years old. He is a musician and also an instrumentalist. The instrument that he plays is called a *Kinnera* that has been handed down from the last three generations. He said he has seen no change or development in the situation of his family and that of his community in the past. “Nothing has changed; then we had no house, now too we don't have a house; then we were illiterate, now too we are illiterate. We were beggars then, we are beggars even now,” he said.

The Surabhi artistes are known as Arey Marathi. In days gone by, the Arey Marathi troupes would travel in bullock carts, from village to village, set up camp near a well or forest for good luck and stage their shows. The audience had to pay to see their show. Krishnaiah remembers that from two *annas* (when 16 annas made one rupee) per entry in his childhood, the price rose to Rs2. But nowadays, with TV and other entertainment media available, there is no demand for their shows. The men of this community, therefore, live by selling knick-knacks while the women have become domestic workers and their children work in small hotels. “There is no respect for our talent. We would demonstrate our majesty through acting, singing and narrating tales of the brave and the generous on the stage, but now we have been reduced to beggars, living in tin-roofed houses, rarely eating full tummy and leading a life of uncertainty,” said Krishnaiah. Another Surabhi artiste R. Ramulu, spoke of multi-talented artistes would don as

many as four roles at one time, and would even also play musical instruments like the tabla and harmonium, such was the talent in the community.

A young girl, Savitri, a mother of two, who dropped out from B. Com spoke of the vagaries and illogic by the government officials in giving them no caste certificate. When she went to the Mandal Revenue Office along with her father, they were shocked that their caste did not figure in any list. They then approached the higher official who asked them to prove that they indeed belonged to the Surabhi caste. Her father had to don make up and put up a show in the MRO's office. Only then they were then given the caste certificate. But the certificate showed her as belonging to Buduga Jangam which is in the BC "B" category, which is higher than the category BC "A" to which the Surabhi community belongs. All this after her father was made to put up a show as a Surabhi artiste. Their effort was of no use since there were many others in the "better off castes" of the "B" category, who got priority over her.

Venkateswarlu, a puppeteer and a Surabhi artiste, said his problem was not getting caste certificates which he got for more than 3,500 people. His concern was that his art was dying and that his would be the last generation to act, sing and play musical instruments since none of the younger generation was interested in continuing the art that gave them neither money nor social status. He believes his art should survive because it is unique. "I might be a beggar and very poor, but my art is neither poor nor backward. It deserves to live forever," he said. No government or cultural organization has shown interest in preserving the traditional art of the Surabhi.

### ***Voices of the nomadic youth***

Two youngsters belonging to the Vamshiraj or Picchakuntla community, spoke of their trauma of belonging to the community whose name is commonly used as a term of abuse and in a very derogatory manner, indicating anything cheap and worthless. Ashok, a teenager studying in high school, said the very name of his caste evoked contempt, derision and laughter. He was ashamed to claim his caste, especially in his school. Two changes he noticed in his caste people from his father's generation to that of his: One, they had begun to wear clean clothes, and two, they had food to eat. Reservation was of no use to his community as not even 1 percent would be able to use it for employment, so low was the educational level in the community, he said.

Another youngster, Malliah also of the Vamshiraj or Picchakuntla community, said his people remained weak and susceptible to exploitation mainly because of the low status of their caste; they were rejected by society and denied an identity and status. Therefore, they remained outside the purview of education; their lack of education made them vulnerable to discrimination and exploitation. The community needs to learn discipline; they need to assert themselves, to stand up for themselves and their rights. "We have no determination to improve our status, we continue to bow to them (upper castes) deferentially, doing salaam. We are still not free; we remain in their clutches," he said, meaning the upper caste people.

A Mudiraj youth said that their communities have remained beggars because they had not learnt to demand. "We continue to beg ... we beg for a ration card, we beg for land, we beg for house ... that is our situation," he said. He believed that the situation of his community was worse off today than in the days of his grandfather. "The country got independence, but our community remained enslaved; the community continues to be treated with suspicion; we are excluded, discriminated against and ill-treated as people not worthy of respect," he said.

### ***Dialogue with the Veerabhadriya or Veeramushti community***

The Veeramushti Community is predominantly present in Telangana, in every district of the state. The community is also present in Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. The

community's population in Telangana is about 10 lakhs and they are among the most poor and backward. They are part of the family of nomadic and semi-nomadic people. The community traditionally used to earn a livelihood going from village to village performing all kinds of tricks and feats such as piercing iron rods in various parts of the body, flagellating themselves, breaking bricks with bare fists, walking on fire and so on. The community's caste "occupation" was to entertain people with their amazing feats in return for which they would be rewarded with food and foodgrains. They also had a hoary oral tradition of storytelling, especially of Purana-based mythological stories. Their primary narration is the story of Daksha Yagna as they trace their ancestry to Veerabhadra, who was created by Lord Shiva, the story goes, out of rage against King Daksha who was responsible for the death of his wife Dakshayini. Veerabhadra destroys King Daksha while performing a yagna in the presence of the invitees that included celestial beings. The community traces its ancestry to the ancient kingdoms where, they said, they served in the army as soldiers and were known for their bravery as "veerulu" or brave men and hence, are known as Veeramushti. Another version of how their caste name came to be is that their ancestor was born from the sweat of Veerabhadra and hence the caste name.

As "Sanchara Jati" they would go from village to village, showing off their feats and in return the community would feed them. During summer and winter, they would pitch their make-shift homes under a tree on the outskirts of a village. During the monsoon, however, they were allowed access to the village's temple or "eerla" masjid where they would shelter from rain.

The community faced an unusual problem because of the caste name "Veeramushti" since "mushti" in coastal Andhra Telugu means begging. They were identified as beggars and looked down upon. As one leader explained, "mushti" was not "begging" but was a clenched fist, meaning they were warriors with clenched fists or brave warriors. They prefer the name Veerabhadriya now for their caste since Veeramushti has brought them contempt and scorn. Although their caste is known as a begging caste, they did not beg from everybody, not even from upper castes. They were "dependent" on Vysyas or Komati who would invite them to perform "Shava" as their feats are known, as part of the rituals of birth, marriage and death and would accordingly reward them. For three days during the Sivaratri festival, the full "glory" of the Veerabhadriya people is on display as they are in demand to perform their feats. They also earn well during this festival. "Our greatness has a life of a mere three days," said a leader poignantly referring to the three days in the year when their demand is at a peak.

They are considered as a dependent caste of the Komatis since they share a common religious affiliation. Both are Lingayats, or Shiva-worshippers and hence, the mutual relationship. They have relations with yet another Lingayat group, namely, the Jangams. The Jangams wear a "linga" around their necks and are considered "gurus" of Veeramushti. They perform the rituals at the marriages and deaths of the Veeramushti community.

Like most other nomadic communities, the Veerabhadriya community too is included in BC "A" group which the community leaders believe has been an injustice as they should have been categorized as tribals and included in ST category. The community leaders believe their situation is worse than the SCs and STs. Literacy is barely 1 or 2 percent in their community; there is none who owns even a shop, forget about owning an industry. So far, none from the community has been elected even as a ward member of any municipal body so there is no question of an elected MLA or MP. The exceptions are counted on the fingers of one hand: One person from the community got a PhD and is employed in a central government research institute; another person from the community was chief engineer in the Andhra Pradesh government and has now retired and there is one practicing as a medical doctor. Just three persons have made it in life in a population of 10 lakhs, they said. Asked how many youths were studying in professional colleges, the leaders counted on their fingers and gave the figures: Ten boys were

studying MBBS and 30 were studying engineering/technology courses. There is no girl of the community studying at that level.

### ***Outside mainstream society***

Over the years, as changes came over society, the Veeramushti people had to change their ways of making their living. As their earnings dwindled with the lessening of Komati patrons, their women turned to making “*chapalu*” or mats from palm leaves which were used for dining or as sheets on the floor to sit or sleep on. As palm trees began to disappear and the demand for mats fell due to changes brought about by modernization and the availability of plastic mats, they took to tattooing as an alternative. Once tattoo machines came in and the demand for their hand-worked tattoos lessened, they took to house-to-house trading of vessels in exchange for old clothes. They continue to sell aluminum vessels both in villages and in cities. Earlier they would use horses and donkeys to carry their stock from village to village. Later, women would carry the loads on their head. Today, while women continue to carry the loads on their head some youths are hiring autorickshaws to carry the aluminum vessels that they exchange for utensils and other household items that are not needed by the households. They have even fitted their autos with a public address system with the recording of their message which announces their wares as they go from locality to locality. Even this profession does not bring them a stable income. They cannot afford accommodation in the city/town, hence they live on the outskirts. They remain semi-nomadic, outside the mainstream society.

In 1994, their struggle for changing the caste name succeeded and they became officially “Veerabhadriya” but retained their old identity as “Veeramushti” next to it in brackets. Several of them also decided to “modernize” their names and dropped the traditional “ayya” (for male) and “amma” (for female) from their names. The change in the name of the community and in their personal names gains them acceptance in the mainstream society. Since they have settled down and are visible in society, the barriers have come down a little. Even in the 1980s, they would not even be allowed to drink water from the community well but today there is no hesitation in inviting them for a meal in their friends’ and neighbors’ houses. But in villages, they are still treated with disdain and face humiliation for their “low” status as a semi-nomadic people. They lack the confidence to approach people and talk to them on an equal footing. “We still live in fear. We have no confidence. We still are unable to speak to ‘big’ people,” said a leader.

### ***“Welfare Sangam” tries reforms in social life***

Interestingly, the community has set up a welfare committee or “Sangam” wherever a group of their people settled down, in an effort to organize the community, promote a sense of discipline in various aspects of its new social life and infuse a sense of fraternity among them. The main reason for the community to organize itself and put in place some rules and regulations and a few welfare measures was the indifference of the government towards their community and its failure to recognize its concerns. This effort began in 1972. The Sangam today bears the cost of the funerals in the community. It encourages its members to send their children to school. It had also “banned” drinking liquor in the “*kallu compound*” or toddy-vending areas since both men and women would frequent them regularly. While this “rule” is followed by women mostly, men tend to ignore it, according to the leaders. However, women do consume liquor at home. One of the noteworthy achievements of the Sangam is that now, with a little awareness brought about by the Sangam, none of their children beg. One of the benefits of the Sangam’s support and efforts to spread awareness has been that the members have moved out of huts and into

houses. The Sangam is now focusing on efforts to encourage the youth to take to business as a livelihood option and also emphasizes clean and hygienic personal habits.

The Sangam is the adjudicator of all disputes in the community. Almost all the problems, whether of marriage or disputes involving family members or disputes between community members, are settled by the Sangam. Nobody ever goes to the police or a court of law to settle any dispute. Should anyone go to the police, the police send them back asking them to go approach their Sangam. Should there be a divorce or brothers separate and go their separate ways, they have to inform the Sangam which then updates its records since every person of the community is a member of the Sangam for life. The Sangam also organizes a community feast for the *Bonalu* festival, sacrificing goats to the goddess presiding over *Bonalu* and using the meat to cook up a feast to be consumed at a community celebration of the festival.

The leaders attributed their ability to participate in the meeting with us and to vocalize their concerns without any diffidence or fear, to the Sangam as it had enabled similar dialogues with officials and others. “We are able to talk to you only because of the Sangam,” said one of the leaders.

Considering that the community cannot access institutional finance, it depends on private financiers who charge them heavy interest. Since their business is small and unstable, the borrowers find it difficult to pay the interest. They are unable to pay the house rent or the interest on the loan which results in harassment by the financiers, so much so that a group of young men came to the community leaders and said they were nearing breaking point and were considering suicide as a solution. On average, they earn Rs6,000–7,000 a month which barely meets the requirements of a family. “We were perhaps better off under trees only,” said a leader who counseled the youth not to lose hope and that they would find a way out.

A major demand of the community has been to include them under the ST category. While they were previously recognized as DNTs, following the recommendations of the Anantaraman Commission they were reclassified as BC “A” which, according to the community leaders, caused a huge “loss” to the community as they were deprived of help and benefits from the government that the community deserved. Due to a campaign by some leaders, the Andhra Pradesh government sent a list of ten communities, including the Veerabhadriya community, to the central government in the mid-1970s, recommending that they be included in the ST category, but nothing came of it.

### **The Veerabhadriya women**

The community leaders said both men and women earn a livelihood in their community. They claim that their women are more confident, bold, outgoing and capable of managing their life without being dependent on men in comparison to women of other castes. They admit that the household runs on the earnings of the women. The women spend all their earnings on the house and children. Men, on the other hand, spend their earnings on two things: Servicing of “finance” or loans taken and on liquor. “The woman is our *devata*,” said a leader. Both men and women drink liquor almost daily. But women drink at home while men patronize the *kallu compound*, the open-air bar of the poor. Women drink in moderation while the men drink until they can drink no more, said the leaders. The leaders, all men, admitted that domestic violence was common in the community if not a regular feature. “Men do ‘full domination’ on women,” said a leader using the English phrase. If she answers him back even once he will become violent with her as he believes that he, being a man, was superior and the wife should obey him; 90 percent of men beat their wives regularly, he said.

Generally, girls get married between 14–16 years. Even though the Sangam is opposed to child marriage which was the norm until a few years ago, it has not been able to make much headway in this matter. Earlier, the age of marriage was between 10–12 years. Going by the legal age of marriage, 99 percent of marriages that take place in the community are child marriages, said a leader. Parents continue to benchmark a girl child's menstruation as the age of her marriage.

Vijaya, a young woman belonging to the Veerabhadriya caste in Ibrahimpatnam pointed out she had studied up to intermediate level but when she wanted to study further her parents refused and got her married. The only degree college was in Hyderabad city and her parents did not want to send her as they were worried about her safety. She would like to get a job but one of the requirements for being considered for a job was to show experience. "Once I am married, how will I get experience?" she asked concluding that marriage had forever sealed her fate.

M.Vimala, also of the community in Ibrahimpatnam, and also extremely articulate, pointed out that there was indeed some progress in the way the society perceived her community. Earlier, no one from her community would be allowed to rent a house in the town due to the low social status but nowadays things had changed, and such barriers were breaking down, she said. There are 50 Veerabhadriya families in Ibrahimpatnam and they are doing fairly well economically. However, the community was still a long way from getting empowered, she said. She pointed out that it was still difficult to get a caste certificate as the official machinery was not cooperative and was ignorant of the fact that there were castes such as Veeramushti. We are thus denied our very existence, our very identity, she said. She had a solution to the problem: All the OBCs should come together giving up their caste identity. The forward people among the OBCs should help the backward people to become "forward." Thus, over time, all the OBCs will become forward, and they will no longer need caste certificates, she said.

### ***Needs of the community***

The primary need of the community is education, according to the leaders. Education will bring about awareness and change. As for political participation, they said that since the community does not have the financial capability to fight an election even to the smallest post, some prominent or potential leaders of their community should be nominated to various governmental/official bodies and committees so that they can get exposure to a world that they have been kept out of for their entire existence. Most importantly, they want a Veerabhadriya Finance Corporation to be set up by the government which will make funds and other facilities available to the community that would help the community to develop on different fronts and try and catch up with the rest of the society.

The trend of the government seeking online applications for jobs in government, from sweeper to officer, is a huge disadvantage to the community as there is almost zero awareness of computers in the community, including among the youth. The government should be sensitive to such disadvantages that some communities face, they said.

They wanted the government to set up residential schools for the children of not just their community but for all nomadic and semi-nomadic groups. They also suggested that these schools should have the facility of boarding for parents so that they would have the incentive to visit their children and the children would not get homesick and run away from the hostels as is often the case. Another suggestion they had was that these hostels should not shut down for vacations like other regular student hostels. Their experience with schooling has shown that when the children come home for the vacations like for *Dasara* and *Sankranti* festivals, they invariably do not return to school since they accompany their parents on their travels and their return in time

for the reopening of the schools is not an option for their parents. The scope of the return of the children to the school is almost non-existent. Therefore, the leaders suggested that parents should be allowed to visit their children in their school and special allowance should be made to see that residential schools for children of nomadic and semi-nomadic parents do not have vacations like the regular schools which interrupt their studies permanently. The parents can visit their children on campus and the authorities should make provision for their stay in the interest of continuing the education of the children of the nomadic and semi-nomadic communities.

### **Dommara Community and the stigma of sex work**

The Dommara caste is a small community; it is one of the DNTs that is included in the BCs list and categorized as “A.” Traditionally, the occupation of the caste was sex work; women were engaged in sex work while the men would procure customers. All the four subcastes or hierarchies in the caste were in sex work but each hierarchy’s work was different. The four hierarchies are *Jogin*, *Basvini*, *Dommara* and *Bogum*.

The Dommara caste is traditionally considered superior to Mala-Madiga (untouchable) castes while it is lower than Rajaka (Dhobi or *Chakali*), and Nayi Brahmin (Barber or *Mangali*) castes. While the Mala-Madiga people accept water from the Dommara people, the Rajaka and Nayi Brahmin castes do not. This is the yardstick with which a caste’s position in the caste hierarchy is determined in daily life, as was explained by Yerra Venkatanarayana, retired Sub-Inspector of Police, one of the first government employees from the Dommara caste and President of the Telangana Sanchara Jatula Sangam (Association of Telangana Nomadic Castes).

Even within the Dommara community, only women of the Aarey Dommara subcaste engage in sex work. The women of the Dommara caste are experts in comb-making which the men sell. Men of all the four hierarchies of the Dommara people rear pigs for a living. They also get wood from forests for their women to make combs and other articles for household use that they sell as a side business. But this activity has disappeared as forests have been made inaccessible due to various laws forcing the men to search for other avenues of livelihood. Most of these men are now into petty businesses of dealing with scrap, selling stuff on roadsides and so on.

According to estimates, there are about 500 Dommara families in each of the ten districts of Telangana (of the previously united Andhra Pradesh). The Dommara population in Telangana state is estimated to be 10,000 families. While most of the Dommara women in northern Telangana districts continue with the caste occupation of sex work, in southern Telangana districts especially of Nalgonda and Rangareddy districts, this work is mostly limited to the commercial and tourist hubs. However, in the districts of Mahbubnagar and Khammam (undivided) districts, Dommara women do not engage in sex work.

In the Rayalaseema region (of the united AP comprising the districts of Kurnool, Kadapa, Chittoor and Anantapur), the Dommara people have given up sex work due to increasing education levels in the community. Similarly, in Anantapur it has progressed a great deal, acquiring property due to the access not only to education but also due to the district’s proximity to Karnataka which offered employment/business opportunities. In the coastal Andhra region, however, the Dommara women practice “high-tech prostitution” especially in Krishna and Guntur districts, according to a community leader. Women from the community in the two Godavari districts carry on with the traditional occupation in urban centers like Mumbai. Nowadays, in several places, the men of the Dommara caste get girls of other castes from other villages and run the sex work business.

In some areas, the women and men who gave up their traditional occupation discovered an alternative: The young girls and boys of the community do shows called “recording dances”

either publicly or in hotels and restaurants which involves dancing to popular film songs, especially the so-called “item numbers” of Hindi and Telugu films. However, the police banned the “recording dances” saying they were “obscene.” The community leaders protested that it was not fair to ban their performances while allowing the so-called vulgar song sequences in films. The officialdom was however deaf to the pleas of the community to show them alternative means of livelihood. “Does this mean that we should go back to our traditional profession of sex work?” asked a leader. The film industry is encouraged by the government by giving subsidies and such facilities at low or no cost but bans dances and songs of that very film industry when sung and danced for a livelihood by poor men and women. “Does this mean that only moneyed people can indulge in ‘vulgarity’ and ‘obscenity’ but not the poor?” asked Venkatnarayan. In fact, several women who were rendered unemployed by the ban returned to sex work.

The other traditional occupation of doing “impossible” feats such as walking on a rope, climbing a pole, pulling, breaking bricks with a single blow or lifting boulders with hair too have disappeared especially in the two Telugu states as they do not generate a sustainable livelihood for the families. The few families that can be seen here and there doing these tricks are mostly from outside the two Telugu states, according to the leaders.

In the past, the traditional occupation of sex work of the Dommara people was not seen as demeaning or low or had stigma attached to it as it is nowadays. For instance, in the case of *Jogins*, that is, women of Dommara and other “lower” castes like SCs who were “dedicated to the service of a local god” was essentially a socially sanctioned practice of making women available to all the men of the village. Similarly, the practice of the rich and the powerful men in the village taking Dommara women as their mistresses, when the women became *Dommarasani* and *Venkatasani*, that is, mistresses of the rich, was socially sanctioned. The mistress often benefited as she would be gifted land or some form of an asset from the man who took her as a mistress. The children of these relationships were also socially acceptable. While these “institutions” have been eliminated in modern times, the practice of dedicating women to local gods as “*Jogins*” continues in some pockets despite the government having banned it.

Within the Dommara caste, there are three subcastes, namely Aarey Dommara, Reddy Dommara and Telaga Dommara. While women of the Aarey Dommara practiced sex work, women of the other two subcastes were agriculture-oriented as they were part of the “*Dommarasani*” and “*Venkatasani*” tradition, and hence were better off financially and had a higher social standing. However, within the caste too, there is a division between those who do sex work and those who do not; the former is being looked down upon by the latter. With stigma being attached to sex work nowadays, unlike in the past, those who are in sex work tend to live in isolation, having no social relations since society does not accept their work as legitimate or respectable work. Traditionally, every family of the Dommara caste would dedicate a girl to sex work; other family members would take up pig-rearing, learning the “circus” tricks and so on. These were “*kula vrutti*” or occupations assigned to their caste and hence, there was no stigma attached to their work, especially to sex work. “What was our caste occupation for hundreds of years is now seen and treated as illegal. It has become an abuse word, a bad word.” The caste leaders blame the current situation on the country becoming free from colonial rule. “Freedom became our nemesis,” the leaders said.

### ***Neglect of the community by government***

The community leaders argue that when the government made sex work an illegal activity, then it should have shown or created alternative occupations and rehabilitated the community members as they were rendered unemployed. But they were criminalized all over again in a free

India for practicing their caste occupation. Moreover, the government neglected the nomadic communities and failed to recognize their caste occupations such as pig-rearing, a traditional occupation of all the nomadic communities. While the government set up ministries, federations, and similar bodies to promote such activities as sheep-rearing, poultry and fisheries, why was not a federation for pig-rearing set up, the leaders asked. Even during the Muslim rule in the princely state of Hyderabad, pig-rearing was not banned nor were they stigmatized for their caste occupation by the rulers despite the fact that Islam considers pigs as unclean and prohibits consumption of pork.

### **Women of the Dommara community**

The status of Dommara women is different from women of other nomadic communities, particularly because traditionally they have been the bread-winners of the family. The community is matrilineal. The Dommara women manage the finances of the household and take the responsibility of caring for the husband and children. The women are given a dowry by men during marriage; they can divorce the husband; both divorcees and widows can remarry if they choose to. In terms of drinking liquor, both husband and wife go to the house of the local Goud (the traditional toddy-tapper) to have a drink of toddy. They are believed to be more assertive and have greater freedom than women of other nomadic communities. Men, however, admit that in practice, there is no gender equality despite women being assertive and free.

Venkatnarayan said that the Dommara children face a unique problem while taking admission in school. They do not know the name of their father and face a dilemma when it comes to filling up the form that requires the father's name to be mentioned. Most of them are born to unknown male clients of their mother. A headmaster of a government school in Bhongir town in Nalgonda district solved the "problem." The father's name of such children was put down as "Paisa" meaning money; similarly, their surname too was recorded as "Paisa."

No Dommara woman likes to admit her caste since sex work is associated with it and she is immediately, mentally, labeled as a woman who is available for sex. Interestingly, the Dommara men do not face such stigma. Yet, many of them pursue their caste occupation as there is no alternative available to either men or women. The women fall back on sex work and the men do "contract work" that is, getting girls from other castes and villages to ply their caste trade and take a share of their earnings.

The caste elders have been discussing whether they should change the name of their caste as other nomadic groups and lower castes have been doing to avoid stereotyping, discrimination and humiliation since their caste name has been used as a term of abuse. The new names being adopted by almost all the BCs are an attempt to gain respectability and remove the stigma or low social status associated with the "lower" castes. The younger generation of Dommara people want to have nothing to do with the caste name. The better off and the educated among the Dommaras do not claim their caste. Several of them often claim to belong to other more acceptable backward castes such as Goud, Kapu, Munnuru Kapu and so on. If they give out their caste as Dommara, they are not given a house to rent or get a job as a domestic maid or a watchman in the cities and towns. Several educated Dommaras who have gotten an education and are professionals such as doctors, engineers and chartered accountants, with some settled abroad, are ashamed to be associated with their caste. As yet, there is no unanimity on a new name to be adopted for their caste.

The community leaders believe that their community is being criminalized all over again as in the colonial times and has been pushed into a corner with their traditional occupations snatched away and no alternatives being shown to them. "Our caste occupation has been made

illegal and banned; our traditional access to forest access has been taken away; pig-rearing is discouraged with municipal authorities killing or confiscating our animals. What alternatives do we have? How do we survive? Isn't it the government's responsibility to rehabilitate the community?" asked Venkatnarayan. He pointed out that the Dommara caste is even listed as "Donga" caste, *donga* in Telugu means a thief.

The criminalization of the nomadic communities during the colonial rule could perhaps be explained by the fact that the British rulers had no scruples in exploiting the natives for free labor on dam, railway and other construction projects. But a free India, too, neglected them. For several decades, an independent India blacked out the nomadic communities from all debates on poverty, welfare and development. Even during the backward class movement for reservation from the 1980s onwards, they were not included because the term "BC" was used only for the artisanal and service castes, not the nomadic people. Venkatnarayan says that a huge injustice was done to the nomadic people by including them in the BCs instead of maintaining their identity as DNTs. Even the small concessions that were offered to the communities were gradually withdrawn as the people had no awareness or realized the importance of availing concessions. For example, as many as 16 hostels were started for DNTs in the erstwhile united Andhra Pradesh state. Almost all of them are now either closed down or have been converted to BC hostels as the nomadic people failed to send their children to school.

The community listed its needs as land, loans, subsidies and free education for their children. Importantly, since nomadic communities are present in every district of Telangana and every one of them rears pigs traditionally, the government should set up a state-level federation and set up district level branches to encourage pig-rearing and marketing of pork which has a huge export market. They believe that through this one measure, the future of the nomadic communities will look up.

### **Educated voices of the DNT people**

One of the few lecturers belonging to the small nomadic tribe called the Ramajogi that practices nature cures, a youngster expressed anguish at the injustice that continues to be meted out to the DNTs. He held the government mainly responsible for the total neglect of his people. The Ramajogi is one of the several communities that is present only in a few districts of Telangana and finds no mention in the gazette notification recognizing the various communities of nomadic and semi-nomadic peoples. It is not found in SCs or STs or OBCs lists. When he, as a student, went to the officials to get a caste certificate, he was threatened with criminal action and jail for making false claims. Subsequently, over several years, he made more than 150 representations to MLAs and ministers and other VIPs regarding the non-recognition of his people but nothing came of it. He did not even get an acknowledgment of his representations, let alone action to rectify the omission. Those who belong to the Ramjogi community do manage to get a certificate but one that gives some other name of a community, depending on the whims of the local revenue officials. Regarding the discrimination, exploitation and violence that the nomadic people experience regularly, he said, "The upper caste people are not our enemy. The government is our enemy, the main reason for our plight," he said.

A similar experience was narrated by Jogi Durga Shankar, president of the nomadic Jogi Sangam and lecturer in a junior college in Mahbubnagar. His caste, Jogi, is concentrated in Kothakota and Gadwal areas of Mahbubnagar district. His caste men repair locks while the women make knick-knacks from beads and sell them. They have been living in the Wanaparthy area for almost 80 years. Yet their caste is not found in the government list of castes which means their caste people will not be able to avail any reservation benefit. In the town of Mahbubnagar,

there are about 15–20 Jogi families living near or around temples. None of them owns any land or houses. A retired official of the government of Andhra Pradesh said that the campaign against pig-rearing, which is either a major or minor occupation of almost all nomadic communities, and killing them for one reason or the other, that they were spreading diseases, had ruined several families. As many as 500 families who lost their valued assets of pigs almost overnight migrated to Chennai to beg, he said. The communities that suffered huge losses had no voice to demand reparations for the loss of their livelihoods.

A schoolteacher belonging to the Gangireddu community said he was opposed to the changing of the communities' traditional names that has become a trend to overcome the traditional contempt, stigma and lack of respect associated with their communities. "We should retain our caste names, use our caste names as surnames and bring them acceptability and respectability," he said. He wanted all the associations of the nomadic communities to come together on a common platform and launch a major struggle. "Unity is the need of the hour. Our motivation and anger should be constant. Unless we take to the streets, nobody will hear us, much less address our problems," he said. An Arey Marathi student echoed these sentiments: "If we go our different ways, we will remain where we are," he said.

The president of a nomadic association said that now that it was clear to all of their communities that political parties acknowledge their existence only during elections for their votes. The people should awaken to the fact that they are being exploited. "They (politicians) will not enable us to improve our situation as long as we sell our votes to them. Enough of pleading with them for concessions and subsidies and other benefits. Enough of mere words. Why are we begging of them? We should fight and claim our rights," he said.

One of the rarest of rare nomadic woman belonging to one of the "begging" castes holds a doctorate and works as a member of the faculty in a central university in Hyderabad, the capital city of Telangana. She said education was the only weapon that could empower her people. She belongs to one of the driest districts of Andhra Pradesh and pointed out the irony in the concept of "sancharam" of moving from place to place in search of a livelihood. The people of her parent drought-prone district were forced to out-migrate in large numbers looking for work either as construction labor working in faraway places or as daily wage labor in cities nearby such as Bangalore, Chennai or Hyderabad. This migration for a livelihood in the modern era had made nomads of a large number of non-nomadic people, she said.

### **Summing up**

To sum up, in the background of the arts and skills of the Dommara people having perished and modern entertainment such as TV and movies had displaced them from their livelihood, the community looks for support from the government for themselves and their children. They point out that the nomadic communities do not want to lead a nomadic life anymore as they can see for themselves that those who had settled down had managed to improve their standards of living. Besides the artistes, the practitioners of sex work who constitute a large chunk of the population, need to be rehabilitated. The state should provide a job to each of the nomadic households. No matter how small, a regular job would pave the way for their gradual move out of poverty and destitution.

Free education from school to university level should be implemented for the nomadic communities. The situation obtaining at present is such that while the learning outcomes in government-run schools are poor, private schools are out of the reach of the nomadic communities. Therefore, although these communities have realized the importance of education, in the present circumstances, they are able to get only one child educated, almost always a son, which

is all they can afford given their deprivation. This creates another section of deprived people, the female, within the families and in the community.

### **Notes**

- 1 A note of the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of India, dated January 30, 2014, giving the approval in principle of the cabinet with regard to the recommendations of the National Commission for De-notified, Nomadic and Semi-nomadic Tribes.
- 2 Report of the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, 70th session (February 19–March 9, 2007), 71st session (July 30–August 17, 2007), 36.

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# 27

## MEDIA IN INDIA

### Free to exclude?

*P. L. Vishweshwer Rao*

#### **Introduction**

The Indian media are among the most respected institutions in the country, with an illustrious history of being at the vanguard of the freedom struggle. In the post-independence years, it had its days of glory as a friend of the people and as a crusader against corruption. It also has a brief ten-month long period of shame during the Emergency when it caved in to the pressures of an authoritarian government and acquiesced to pre-censorship and even self-censorship.

In recent times, the media have been under severe criticism for abandoning their role as a watch-dog and for selling their soul through paid news, private treaties, turning into a puppet in the hands of the government in power and so on. However, such criticism seems to have had not much of an effect on the astounding growth of the media, especially the print media whose doomsday has been spelled out in the Western developed societies. Evidently, it has a bright future in the developing societies where illiteracy is widespread. The print media certainly will continue to grow, especially in India as literacy grows and the overall economic status of the people improves.

#### **India, world's largest consumer of newspapers**

According to the World Association of Newspapers, India is the world's largest consumer of newspapers with over 92,222 newspapers with a circulation of over 100 million copies daily. With Indian print media accounting for 45 percent of total advertising spend, the reach of the print media is not only broad but also powerful in its impact. For the past decade, India's newspaper industry has bucked the trend across the West of declining readership. According to the Indian Readership Survey (IRS), the overall readership of newspapers had grown from 407 million readers in 2017 to 425 million readers at the end of the first quarter of 2019. However, for the next three quarters, the readership has seen a small but consistent decline in readership. Across India, 36 percent of the respondents read a newspaper in the last month (down from 38 percent in Q3). In urban areas the number stood at 50 percent (down from 51), while in rural areas the number was 29 percent (down from 30). The story was similar for magazines too (Campaign India 2019).

A change that has been wrought due to increasing literacy (from 12 percent in 1947 to 74 percent in 2018) and improving lifestyles is the increasing impact and power of the regional-language newspapers which have displaced English-language newspapers from their *numero uno* position, both in terms of circulation and business. Among the top ten largest circulated daily newspapers, only one is in English, namely the *Times of India*. Others are published in Hindi, Malayalam, Tamil and Marathi whose circulation ranges from 6 to 16 crores. As for readership, the *Times of India* had the highest average readership among English newspapers in 2017. Among the regional language newspapers, *Dainik Jagran* (Hindi) is at the top in the country. The other regional publications with high readership included *Malayala Manorama* (Malayalam), *Daily Thanthi* (Tamil), *Eenadu* (Telugu) and *Lokmat* (Marathi). (Keelery 2020)

### **Media, a conservative stronghold**

The media are among the most conservative institutions in the country in terms of its ownership and the social profile of the journalists it employs. For about 240 years now, since the first newspaper was published in India by an Englishman in 1780, the media have remained elite institutions, owned, controlled and run by the so-called upper castes or the historically privileged people, serving their own interests, covering their own concerns and zealously protecting their position of power and privilege to this day. With very few exceptions, the entire media, both print and electronic, are owned by individuals and business groups that belong to the privileged castes. The Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and other traditionally oppressed groups have not yet gained enough financial muscle or developed enough vested interests to own media. The basic criterion of starting and sustaining media is financial strength which traditionally has been vested with the upper castes and continues to be so. One of the exceptions to this rule is the much-respected Bangalore-based Deccan Herald Group of Karnataka that was started by an OBC businessman five decades ago and has remained among the leading media houses of Karnataka, publishing newspapers and magazines in English and Kannada.

Babasaheb B. R. Ambedkar summed up the situation of the press and its relations with the privileged castes. As he said,

The Congress Press is close to them and is determined not to give the (Untouchables) the slightest publicity. The (Untouchables) cannot have their own Press and for obvious reasons ... The staff of the Associated Press in India, which is the main news distributing Agency in India, is entirely drawn from Madras Brahmins; indeed, the whole of the Press in India is in their hands and they, for well-known reasons, are entirely pro-Congress and will not allow any news hostile to the Congress to get publicity.

(Ambedkar 1945)

According to political scientist Robin Jeffrey, who has carried out a survey of the Indian Press,

The fact that no Dalit men or women worked in editorial jobs on Indian language dailies meant that aspects of the life of Dalits were neglected. And the fact that no sizeable daily in India was owned or edited by Dalits meant that stories about them were unlikely to receive the constant, sympathetic coverage of stories like those, for example, the urban consuming middle-class.

(Jeffery 2003)

Therefore, the finding of Robin Jeffrey is not surprising:

In more than 10 years studying Indian language newspapers, including 20 weeks of travel in which I stayed in 20 towns, visited dozens of newspapers and interviewed more than 250 people, I did not—so far as I know—meet a Dalit journalist working for a mainstream publication, much less a Dalit editor or proprietor.

*(Jeffery 2003)*

Where periodicals for the Dalits existed, they were fringe publications, often with a literacy emphasis and with limited influence beyond the circle that produced them. “The most senior Dalit journalist I met in more than ten years of studying Indian newspapers had never worked for a commercially-run daily,” says Robin Jeffrey (Jeffery 2003).

According to some surveys there are not even 50 Dalit journalists in India; all are employed in regional language press; almost nobody handles the political beat, and no Dalit journalist works for an English-language paper. Discrimination against the under-privileged caste journalists, where they are found, manifests itself in the form of marginalization in terms of beats allotted, the work given and in terms of issues like giving bylines and so on. Backward-caste journalists say they are marginalized not only inside the newsroom, where upper caste journalists may form a closely knit community but also in places like press clubs which are social spaces specifically meant for journalists.

### **Three-fourths of Indian citizens are invisible in the media**

Yet another characteristic of Indian media is that it is dominated by men belonging to upper castes and upper classes. If OBCs, women and Muslims are poorly represented among journalists, Dalits and Adivasis are almost non-existent. Thus, almost three-fourths of the country’s people are invisible in the media, having no say in their own affairs. When the people are invisible, naturally their voice too will go unheard, meaning that these citizens of the country are nonexistent for the media. Whether it was the Newspaper Revolution of the 1990s or the TV Revolution of the present day in India, they have all bypassed the suppressed people of India, the OBCs, the marginalized sections and the Muslims. The media ignore 80 percent of the population and yet it claims that it speaks for the entire country. This argument does not hold water.

The fact of the matter is that the media are merely a mirror reflection of the society, faithfully reflecting all the age-old biases and prejudices that have affected Indian society for hundreds of years. It ignores, plays down and even suppresses issues of the downtrodden people. It ridicules when it cannot ignore them, like during the anti-reservation agitation of recent times, and opposes policies that try to bring about a modicum of fairness and justice to the traditionally oppressed people belonging to the “lower” castes. The media reacted with outrage to the “Mandalization” of the country and blatantly threw its collective strength behind the anti-reservationists, giving a go-by to the well-known principle of objectivity that gives the profession of journalism credibility.

The managements of the media organizations and the editorial teams that work under them have, in reality, been reproducing the social prejudice in the content of the media for more than seven decades since the country’s independence and the egalitarian values and policies as state policy as envisaged by the constitution. While the constitution abolished the Varna or caste-based discrimination, it also directed the state to accomplish the twin tasks of democratizing its own institutions by giving due representation to marginalized people, and to democratize Indian society.

Running a media organization that publishes a newspaper, magazine or a TV news channel or an FM radio station, is not like owning any industry. Since the press is regarded as one of the

pillars of democracy, it plays a significant role in shaping the opinion of the people, influencing the policies of the government and keeping a watch over the government and society in general, pointing out the negative trends and supporting the positive trends. The demand for representation of marginalized people in the media is not merely a plea for jobs but a demand for the implementation of democracy, on the lines of representation in the legislative bodies and Panchayati Raj institutions. It is a step towards ensuring social justice which is an integral part of the constitutional responsibility of the state and also of the media that is supposed to expose the injustices in the society with the aim of initiating change that makes a society just and equal. Yet, as the following pages reveal, Indian media have chosen to ignore the many ills of society that affect three-fourths of its people.

### **Exclusion in Indian media**

The major characteristics of Indian media are the following:

1. It is monopolistic in the sense that a handful of individuals/entities own and control the entire media.
2. Diversity of opinion across different forms of media is lacking since a handful of individuals/entities own newspapers, magazines, FM radio channels and TV channels.
3. It lacks social diversity in its ranks in terms of the people it employs.
4. Both the management and the news departments are monopolized by the traditionally privileged caste groups.
5. Hindu upper-caste men dominate as decision-makers.
6. Gender bias is all-pervasive with women journalists constituting a small minority.
7. Caste-wise, upper castes are predominant, led by Brahmins, both in the newsrooms and as decision-makers in media organizations.
8. OBCs are negligible in terms of representation as journalists and even lesser as decision-makers in newsrooms.
9. Muslims are nearly absent in the newsrooms.
10. Only Christians are proportionately represented.
11. The representation of Dalits in the Indian media is very marginal.
12. The Adivasi representation is almost nonexistent in the Indian media.

If in the regional-language media the news departments are overwhelmingly “upper” caste and male-dominated with a stark absence of OBC, Dalit and women journalists, the situation is worse in the English-language media in this aspect, with near-absence of OBC and Dalit journalists on the rolls of the media organization. If getting entry to the media organization is difficult with the owner-editors being “upper” caste, surviving in the editorial rooms of the newspapers/TV channels is a challenge for OBC and Dalit journalists since almost all decision-makers and colleagues are also “upper”-caste individuals.

Democracy should facilitate equal opportunities to all irrespective of gender, region, caste and religion. But, in India where caste plays a predominant role, every opportunity is available based on caste only. With as much as 80 percent of the population discriminated against and deprived because of their caste affiliation, the media which should be concerned at this social injustice have made no efforts toward diversity in their own organizations, especially in the News/Editorial Department. The media have also not set up any mechanism to ensure inclusiveness in the media. The Indian media have covered issues of the marginalized people superficially or have maintained a studied silence on these issues. It is only after the command-

able efforts of a few researchers to research the Indian media's caste profile that a debate on the discrimination against the caste-unprivileged people has been initiated.

Historically speaking, daily journalism gained momentum in India with the beginning of the 20th century. The earlier newspapers confined themselves mostly to social, economic or educational matters. The stance of the newspapers changed considerably as they began to take a critical stand on political issues with the freedom movement gaining momentum. The newspapers, especially Indian-language papers, were actively involved in mobilizing opinion and support for the freedom movement. They also supported social reform but even then, most newspapers, owned and edited and manned exclusively by upper castes, refused to speak about the oppressed people. This convinced B. R. Ambedkar that the so-called untouchable people needed a platform to voice their issues. Over time, he started as many as four newspapers that reflected his ideology and his struggles. Ambedkar strongly believed that newspapers could bring about a positive change in the lives of the oppressed people. He published three publications, all in Marathi. They were *Mook Nayak* (Leader of the Voiceless, a weekly newspaper), *Bahishkrit Bharat* (Excluded India, a fortnightly newspaper) and *Janata* (The People, a weekly magazine). Ambedkar started propagating a different vision of nationhood for his people through his publications which stressed the difference between his people's nation and that of the mainstream "nation." Ambedkar demanded a separate Dalit-space, rather than a submersion of the Dalit cause in the Gandhian agenda of building a coherent, homogeneous nation-space (Ratnamala 2012).

### **The social and caste composition of newsrooms in newspapers, magazines and digital platforms**

In order to understand the coverage of caste issues in the newspapers in the Indian media, especially the print media, it is important to study the caste composition of the journalists manning the newsrooms of the media. The first major effort to address this issue was that of Delhi-based journalist B. N. Uniyal (1996) and of researcher Robin Jeffrey (2003) who documented the absence of Dalits in the Indian-language print media. While Uniyal and Jeffrey focus on the absolute exclusion of Dalits, they do not throw much light on the predominant exclusion of other unprivileged caste people, the OBCs and Muslims. In the recent past, a few efforts have been made to examine the caste composition of the media houses, with a focus on newsrooms. As a few OBC and Dalit journalists, both men and women, managed to enter the profession, some among them went public with their experiences in the casteist newsrooms. These are discussed here.

The 2019 study by Oxfam India and Newslaundry, a news website, has brought out the clear skewed representation of various people in the news media with upper castes dominating both in numbers and positions of power held in the media organizations. The report shows that vast sections of India's marginalized caste groups do not have access to the media platforms and discourses and they cannot contribute to shaping of public opinion. They are invisibilized despite constituting 80 percent of the country's population (Oxfam India 2019).

Of the 121 newsroom leadership positions—editor-in-chief, managing editor, executive editor, bureau chief, input/output editor—across the newspapers, TV news channels, news websites, and magazines under study, 106 (87.6 percent) are occupied by journalists from the upper castes, and none by those belonging to the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and the Scheduled Tribes (STs). Other highlights of the study's findings are given below:

- Three out of every four anchors of flagship debates, that is 75 percent, are upper caste. Not one is Dalit, Adivasi, or OBC.

- For over 70 percent of their flagship debate shows, news channels draw the majority of the panelists from the upper castes.
- No more than 5 percent of all articles in English newspapers are written by Dalits and Adivasis. Hindi newspapers fare slightly better at around 10 percent.
- Over half of those writing on issues related to caste in Hindi and English newspapers are upper caste.
- Around 72 percent of bylined articles on news websites are written by people from the upper castes.
- Only 10 of the 972 articles featuring on the cover pages of the 12 magazines under study, or a mere 1 percent, are about issues related to caste (*Who Tells Our Stories Matters* 2019, 6).

Tejas Harad (2020) conducted a survey in his quest to find castes in newsrooms of English newspapers. He found a small number of Dalit/Bahujan journalists including women. Their experiences were anything but encouraging. The stereotyping that goes with caste identity was rampant, and hardly camouflaged; exclusion was not very subtle; and discrimination was overt. Reporters' stories were held over, or they were given assignments that required long distances. One Dalit even reported that he was never given a press release to his hand by his supervisor, a high-caste man. He just dropped them on the desk, evidently not willing to touch him or perhaps even to show his disdain. The problems listed by the respondents included experiencing backlash if they performed well or even mildly asserted themselves in the form of discarding their story ideas; they are attributed affiliation to political parties based on their caste, get overloaded with work compared with others, they are "given" stories while others asked for their interest, and not included in discussions over story ideas.

Half the respondents said they did not know a single other Bahujan journalist despite the fact that Bahujans make up close to 80 percent of India's population. While the mere presence of Bahujan journalists in the newsrooms may not change policies or the type of news covered, certainly there is strength in numbers. The minuscule number of Bahujan journalists who are part of the news industry will not be able to challenge the cultural bias and caste discrimination they face at their workplaces (Harad 2020).

The paper concludes that it is time to implement reservation in the newsrooms because India's English media newsrooms remain urban-centric, upper class, upper caste and ignorant to the realities of vast swathes of Indian masses. Market, modernity and merit have not been enough to fight the dominance of the upper castes in the newsrooms. "If the will for change is not there, it seems only a measure like reservations will dent the domination of upper castes in India's newsrooms," concludes the report.

The Indian press until recently was considered one of the best in the democracies of the world. Yet it failed to act on the several reports of lack of diversity in the Indian newsrooms and lack of space of the most vulnerable of people, namely Dalits both in the newsrooms and news pages. Despite the fact that the American experiment by the American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE) was successful in improving the diversity in the American newspapers. The ASNE website outlines its belief that ethnic, social and gender-based diversity are essential for impartial and unbiased coverage of communities. Therefore, the ASNE conducts annual censuses of Hispanics, African Americans, Asian Americans, Native Americans and women in the newsrooms of major media houses and establishes three-year benchmarks for measuring progress. Thus far the American model has shown some progress: At the time of its inception in 1978, the percentage of representation of minorities in the media in the US stood at 4 percent. Twenty years later in 1998, the proportion had risen to 11.5 percent. Models like the ASNE could well be replicated in India but no media organization has taken any initiative in this direction nor has any regulatory authority like

the Press Council of India and Editors Guild of India. Aman Sethi quotes B. R. Ambedkar to reveal the double standards of those in public life to summarize the attitude of the newspaper owners.

It is usual to hear all those who feel moved by the deplorable condition of the Untouchables unburden themselves by uttering the cry, “We must do something for the Untouchables.” One seldom hears any of the persons interested in the problem saying, “Let us do something to change the Touchable Hindu.”

(Sethi 2007)

### **“National” media: Upper caste, majoritarian, male-dominated**

The only major study on the social profile of key decision-makers in national media compared to the population share until the Oxfam India study report was released in 2019 was authored by Yogendra Yadav of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (Yadav 2006). It surveyed 315 key decision-makers from 37 “national” media organizations in June 2006. The survey findings revealed an imbalanced social profile in the upper echelons of the Indian media, with the overwhelming representation of the “upper” castes in positions of power in the media while the “lower” castes were negligible. Its major findings were:

- India’s “national” media lacked social diversity: It did not reflect the country’s social profile.
- Hindu upper-caste men dominated the media, with their share in the positions of power in national media being as high as 71 percent.
- The media’s caste profile is equally unrepresentative. “Twice born” Hindus (dwijas comprising Brahmins, Kayasthas, Rajputs, Vaishyas and Khatris) comprise about 16 percent of India’s population but they are about 86 percent of the key media decision-makers in this survey. Brahmins (including Bhumihars and Tyagis) alone constitute 49 percent of the key media personnel.
- Dalits and Adivasis are totally absent among the decision-makers. Not even one of the 315 key decision-makers belonged to the SCs or the STs.
- Similarly, the proportion of OBCs is abysmally low, being a mere 4 percent compared to their population of around 40 percent in the country.
- Muslims too are similarly under-represented in the media, their share being 3 percent compared to their population comprising 13.4 percent of the country’s population.
- Christians are far better represented in the media (mainly in the English-language media) than other minorities, their share being about 4 percent in the media as against their population share of 2.3 percent.
- Social groups such as women who suffer the “double disadvantage” of gender and caste, are also nearly absent among the key decision-makers: While there was not a single woman among the few OBC decision-makers, the number of women from the Muslims and Christians was negligible. Of late, women are seen more prominently but almost all of them belong to upper castes. A Dalit woman journalist is nonexistent, both in Indian-language and English-language media while OBC women journalists are found in minimal numbers, mostly in the regional media.

### **Dalit journalists in national media**

One of the pioneering efforts to study the absence of Dalits from the media was done by B. N. Uniyal who studied the list of journalists accredited to the Press Information Bureau of the

Government of India, in New Delhi to check its caste composition (Uniyal 1996). The list of 686 journalists had 454 of them (66 percent) using their caste as the surname as is a practice among most of the upper-caste communities. The rest used no surname. Out of the 454 accredited journalists who used a surname, two-thirds belonged to the “upper castes.” A breakdown of the upper-caste journalists showed that a little more than half were Brahmins (240), while other upper castes comprised 35 percent. While there were 26 Muslims and 19 Christians, there was no Dalit. In Jeffrey’s study too, he did not find a single Dalit journalist in the Indian-language press. While the Brahmin community whose population is just a little over 3 percent of the Indian population, has monopolized the print media, the other marginalized communities like the Dalits who constitute 16.6 percent of the Indian population (according to the 2011 census) go virtually unrepresented. Interestingly, the percentage of Brahmin journalists is higher in Brahmin-owned establishments such as *The Hindu*, and of Nadars in Nadar-owned newspapers such as the *Dinathanthi* and *Dinakaran* in the Tamil language.

### **Ownership of big media houses: “Upper” castes dominant**

An analysis of the ownership of various media houses and groups shows that out of the four most important English-language dailies, three are owned by Vaishyas and one by a Brahmin. The Times of India Group (Bennett, Coleman and Co. Ltd), the largest mass media company in India, whose holdings include *The Times of India* and the 24-hour news channel Times Now, is owned by the Jain family who are Banias. The *Hindustan Times* is owned by the Bhartias, who are Marwari Bania, and *The Indian Express* is owned by the Goenkas, also Marwari Bania; and *The Hindu* is owned by a Brahmin family.

Among the Indian-language media, *Dainik Jagran*, a Hindi daily newspaper which is the largest selling newspaper in India with a circulation of 55 million, is owned by the Gupta family, Bania from Kanpur. *Dainik Bhaskar*, which is among the most influential Hindi dailies with a circulation of 17.5 million, is owned by the Agarwals, who are also Banias. Reliance Industries Ltd, owned by Mukesh Ambani, a Gujarati Bania, has controlling shares in 27 major national and regional TV channels. The Zee Network, one of the largest national TV news and entertainment networks, is owned by Subhash Chandra, also a Bania.

In southern India, caste manifests itself in a slightly different way but nevertheless it excludes, discriminates and ignores the existence of the marginalized people. For example, the Eenadu Group which owns newspapers, the largest film city in the world and dozens of TV channels, among other businesses—is headed by Ramoji Rao of the Kamma caste which is a peasant caste of Andhra Pradesh. This media house bucks the tradition of Brahmin-Bania ownership of big media. The Kamma caste has emerged as a powerful force, politically and economically, in post-independence India. Earlier, it was an agricultural/peasant caste owning rich fertile lands in the Krishna delta areas of the coastal Andhra region. It invested the surplus generated by agriculture in real estate in Hyderabad, the Telugu film industry in Madras (now Chennai) and over the past four decades has emerged as a politically powerful force too, with the launch of the Telugu Desam Party by well-known film actor N.T. Rama Rao, also a Kamma. Over the years of its dominance, the Kamma caste has transitioned to being considered “upper caste,” especially in the public perception (Balasubrahmanyam 2004).

Another major media house in Tamil Nadu, the Sun TV Group, launched by Kalanithi Maran, is one of the biggest in the country. The Marans are designated as a backward caste, but Kalanithi Maran has emerged as the “undisputed leader” of regional media (Financial Express 2010). The Group owns 33 TV channels in four south Indian languages while the Sun TV Network Ltd is the largest TV network in Asia. The Group also owns 48 FM radio stations

across India while its Sun Direct is the fourth largest direct-to-home service provider in India. It also owns two Tamil-language newspapers and five magazines. According to the Broadcast Audience Research Council India, Sun TV is the leading channel across genres on an all-India basis (IndianTelevision 2020).

### **Media and social exclusion**

The Constitution of India lays down that India is a welfare state which shall be committed to the welfare and development of the entire people including those who have been socially excluded for centuries. The constitution envisaged equality of all citizens through provisions of protective discrimination and focused on the disadvantaged people through educational and economic upliftment programs that would pave the way for effective social inclusion and development of marginalized peoples. Yet in the face of facts that poverty, illiteracy and disease afflict a majority of the citizens we cannot but conclude that the successive governments since independence failed the people. The development programs worked inefficiently and failed to deliver minimum quality of life to most people especially those who have traditionally been “othered” by Indian society.

The three pillars of a democratic state namely, the legislature, the judiciary and the executive have failed to ensure that the poor and the marginalized people got their due and rights promised by the constitution. The Fourth Estate *viz.*, the media, which are considered the fourth pillar of democracy have also failed in speaking on behalf of deprived and wronged people. With few exceptions, the media failed to focus attention of the government and decision-makers on the issues facing the people as it was busy catering to the urban-based middle class and concerned itself with only its readers and viewers. In the past few years, since the BJP has come to power at the center, the media, TV to a larger extent than newspapers, have become a tool to fulfill the agenda of the ruling party. Apart from this aspect, the media have been remiss in ensuring equal opportunity, equal representation to the marginalized people both in terms of coverage and in employing them in their organizations.

The marginalized people have been left out of the communication process. Most of the communication in India has been restricted to the elite and the upper-caste people who monopolized every field of communication. The fact that the marginalized people figure literally nowhere in the media in terms of representation and as decision-makers, reflects the true face of India's casteist society which is mirrored by the national media.

### **Biased coverage of marginalized people**

The media have not only been the monopoly of the traditionally privileged people in terms of ownership of media organizations and employment in the media, but in terms of the coverage in the media of issues of the marginalized people it is either minimal or biased. For instance, if television and newspaper coverage of the anti-reservation agitation was indulgent and one-sided supporting the anti-reservationists, the lack of diversity in the editorial departments or newsrooms is one of the major culprits. In an ideal world where professionalism is paramount, the caste or religious affiliation of a journalist should not matter. But journalism that has little or no space for the majority of citizens is bound to end up missing out on the complexity of the society it seeks to cover. Story ideas will not be taken up, or if taken up, then they will be covered only from a particular perspective.

To be sure, many of the negative trends so evident in Indian journalism—the shrinkage of space, the lack of coverage of rural India or of the problems of poor Indians, the episodic, frenetic

nature of news, the preoccupation with trivia and sensationalism, will not be solved by newspapers and television channels hiring more journalists belonging to the marginalized sections, OBCs, women and Muslims. But greater workplace diversity will certainly infuse a greater degree of vitality in the newsroom as wider varieties of lived experience intrude upon and clash with the largely urban, rich, forward-caste Hindu certitudes of the overwhelming majority of journalists.

### **Nature of discrimination in news coverage**

To understand the nature of discrimination in the coverage of issues relating to marginalized people, the experience of Siddarth Varadarajan, a leading journalist and former editor of *The Hindu*, one of the most respected English-language newspapers in India, is worth quoting in full to understand how caste matters in the Indian media. The following is an excerpt from his narration in *The Hindu*, of June 3, 2006:

My first brush with caste prejudice in higher education came in 1999, when a group of Dalit students from the University College of Medical Science (UCMS) came to see me at my office in another English newspaper where I worked at the time as an editorial writer. The students were residents of the hostel and had silently borne the brunt of casteist abuse and discrimination for some time. Whether by happenstance or design, the Scheduled Caste students were confined to two floors and not assigned rooms elsewhere in the building. In the dining hall, they were forced by the forward caste majority to sit together at one end. If a Dalit student sat somewhere else, he would be abused. "Bloody shaddu," one of them was told when he sat amidst others, "You cannot eat with us."

"The Dalits put up with this harassment and humiliation because, as one of their parents told them, "you have to become a doctor at any cost." But the abuse eventually turned to violence and when one of the students was badly beaten and another had his room ransacked, they decided to go on a dharna.

This is also when they ended up in my office. After hearing them out, I requested the head of the Metro section to send someone to UCMS to cover the dharna. The head of the section promised a reporter would be sent soon. Several days went by but nothing appeared. It turned out no reporter was assigned. I tried again, this time going one notch higher in the editorial chain-of-command. Again there was no response. Eventually, I decided to do the story myself. I spent half-a-day at the college, interviewed the college authorities, the students on dharna as well as the general category students. One of them admitted reluctantly to using the slur "shaddu" for the Scheduled Caste students but only as a "pet name."

I filed the story but it did not appear the next day or the day after. Nobody ever said the story was not interesting or not up to scratch but for some reason space could never be found. The story finally appeared, in a cut and mutilated form, a full month after the Dalit students began their dharna. Needless to say, the travails of the Dalit students at UCMS were not considered newsworthy enough by other newspapers or by any of the news channels.

(Varadarajan 2006)

### **Telugu news media: The beginnings and growth**

The Telugu press has its beginnings during colonial rule in what is Andhra Pradesh today, this region was part of the British Madras Presidency. Therefore, it was started in Madras around 1830,

and established in the delta region of Andhra. Towns like Rajahmundry, Kakinada, Bezawada, Machilipatnam, Amalapuram, Narsapuram and Tenali emerged as centers of the Telugu press. The first publications in Telugu were due to the effort of the Christian Church and the initiative of the English-educated upper castes as only these people had the privilege of being educated. The social reform movement influenced the Telugu press to a large extent (Press Institute of India 1995).

The journal named *Vrutthantini* (1838–42) published from Madras is considered as the first Telugu journal. It was followed by *Vaartha Tarangini* (1842), *Tatvabodhini* (1863), *Hitabodhini* (1864), *Sujanaranjani* (1872), *Andhra Bhasha sanjeevani* (1871), *Purushardha Pradhyayini* (1872), Veeresalingam's *Vivekavardhini* (1874), *Andhra Patrika* (1885), *Satya Samvardhini* (1891), *Sasirekha* (1894), *Desabhimanî* (1896) and so on (Ahuja 1998). Though these journals grew due to the influence of modernist and social reformism they did not overcome the Brahminical Hindu ideology. At the beginning of the 20th century, the Shudra communities became caste conscious and started caste organizations for the welfare of each of their respective communities. Against this backdrop, Anjaneya Chowdary published the magazine named *Chowdary* from Eluru for the Kamma caste and Venkanna published the magazine *Setti Balija* from Amalapuram for the Setti Balija caste. Several more were to follow this trend (Press Institute of India 1995).

The non-Brahmin movement which came in response to Brahmin dominance in education and employment was confined to peasant communities such as the Kamma and Reddy. It failed to take into its fold the suppressed castes. The early movements of assertion of the suppressed people came in the form of *Adi Andhra* and *Adi Hindu* movement by claiming that they were the sons of the soil.

Post-independence India saw a gradual change in the attitude and ideology of the Telugu-language press. The reformist and the religious focus of the press gave way to politics, and especially the interests of the ruling class. In the late 1950s, the prominent Telugu dailies *Andhra Patrika* and *Andhra Prabha* supported the ruling Congress and practiced what has come to be known manufacturing consent by specifically targeting the alternative politics of the communists. The targets were the well-known writer-poet Sri-Sri and the collective of progressive writers, the Abhyudaya Rachayitula Sangham. The press maintained that writers and their literature should not be guided by politics. The opponents of the progressive school of thought banded together as Sahiti Mitrulu in Vijayawada and brought out a book *Donga Dadi* which reflected ideology propagated by the media in favor of the ruling class. It is worth noting here that the Telugu press then was dominated, as elsewhere in the regional language media, by Brahmins both as editors and owners.

### **Telugu press in modern times**

However, in the post-independence era, following the creation of a new Telugu state, Andhra Pradesh in 1956, a new set of people loosened the traditional hold of the Brahmins on the press. The beneficiaries of modernization such as the former feudals and upper Shudra caste like the Kamma, who used the surplus from agriculture and invested in agri-based industries, land and the entertainment industry of cinema. Their runaway success encouraged them to grab their share of political power that had been the monopoly of another upper Shudra caste, the Reddys who dominated as feudal landlords, especially in the former princely state of Hyderabad which covered Telangana region.

The newspaper *Eenadu*, started in 1974 by the Kamma entrepreneur Ramoji Rao whose main success was his chit fund company, Margadarsi, totally changed the discourse of press and politics in Andhra Pradesh. *Eenadu* was the voice of the aspirations of the Kamma community

and about a decade after it was launched, it played a major role in changing the political history by propelling the newly launched party Telugu Desam Party (TDP) of Telugu film idol and a Kamma, N. T. Rama Rao into power (Rao 1994).

*Eenadu* with its phenomenal growth and influence with the readers, became a kingmaker of sorts, influencing and even guiding the politics and fortunes of the Telugu Desam Party. On one hand, it had inseparable and strong links with the capital and politics of the Kamma community and on the other, its innovation, marketing strategies and use of sophisticated technology revolutionized the Telugu print media. The dominance of *Eenadu* and the strengthening of the social and cultural hegemony of the Kamma community and Telugu Desam Party went hand in hand.

To counter this dominance of *Eenadu* and the Kamma community, film director Dasari Narayana Rao whose sympathies lay with the Congress party, launched *Udayam*, a Telugu daily newspaper. This was followed by the launching of *Vartha*, another Telugu daily newspaper, owned by Marwari industrialist Girish Sanghi. Subsequently, both men were elected to the Rajya Sabha on a Congress Party ticket. The other older dailies, *Andhra Prabha* of the Indian Express group and *Andhra Bhoomi* of the Deccan Chronicle group lost their importance as opinion-makers among the Telugu people while the two communist parties' papers *Prajasakti* and *Visalandhra* were confined to their loyal party cadres. *Andhra Jyothi* changed its ownership, shut down for a period and then it was taken over by a journalist belonging to the Kamma community who was beholden to TDP supremo and chief minister N. Chandrababu Naidu, N. T. Rama Rao's son-in-law and fellow-Kamma. He followed the example of *Eenadu* in promoting the policies of the TDP government and the interests of the Kamma community.

An addition to the Telugu dailies' stable was *Sakshi* started by Congress Chief Minister Y. S. Rajasekhara Reddy's (YSR) son Y. S. Jaganmohan Reddy. Launched on March 24, 2008, with a big bang, publishing 23 editions simultaneously from 19 cities in AP and the four cities of Mumbai, Delhi, Chennai and Bengaluru, it soon became one of the leading newspapers. According to the Audit Bureau of Circulations' figures released in December 2015, *Sakshi* is the second largest circulating newspaper in Andhra Pradesh after *Eenadu* with a circulation figure of about 11 lakhs.

The paper followed the examples of *Eenadu* and *Andhra Jyothi* and became the voice of YSR and his government. It also followed the recent tradition of the Telugu media of targeting the political, business and caste opponents of promoters of the various media. Hence, the targets of *Sakshi* were the TDP, N. Chandrababu Naidu and the Kamma community which it exposed through investigative reporting and so on. The Reddy community, the rivals of the Kamma community in the political arena, rallied behind *Sakshi*, and consolidated its political, business and editorial gains. After YSR's death in an air crash, *Sakshi* became the voice of his son and political heir, Jaganmohan Reddy. Subsequently, he started his own political party, the YSR Congress, after breaking away from Congress. *Sakshi* is to the YSR Congress what *Eenadu* once was to the TDP. Thanks to the inflow of capital into *Sakshi* and adoption of various editorial policies and the cult figure status enjoyed by the later YSR, today *Sakshi* has emerged as one of the largest circulated Telugu dailies in the two Telugu states of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh. According to the Audit Bureau of Circulations, *Eenadu* is at the top with 17 lakh circulation *Sakshi* daily came next with a 10.5 lakh circulation and *Andhra Jyoti* with a 6.6 lakh circulation (Audit Bureau of Circulations 2019). Today, Jaganmohan Reddy is the Chief Minister of the smaller state of Andhra Pradesh after Telangana state was formed with the division of the earlier Andhra Pradesh state. His paper *Sakshi*, undoubtedly, played a prominent role in his political victory.

With the formation of Telangana state, the two communist party papers, re-invented themselves into Telangana-focused papers, the *Praja Sakti* (of the Communist Party of India (Marxist)

(CPI-M)) as *Nava Telangana* (The New Telangana) and *Visalandhra* (of CPI) as *Mana Telangana* (Our Telangana).

Even as the mainstream media were prospering, alternative media too emerged in Telugu society from the progressive and Dalit movements. Though they are confined to small circulations, they are effective in exposing the mainstream media and their ruling class ideology. These are left-wing magazines such as *Srujanam*, *Arunatara*, *Janasahiti*; Dalit journals such as *Nalupu* (1989–93) and *Neeli Jhanda* (since 2008) edited by (the late) Bojja Tarakam; *Yedureeta* (1990–4) edited by (the late) U. Sambasiva Rao, *Neti Ekalavya* edited by (the late) K. G. Sathymurthy, *Dalita Rajyam* edited by Katti Padma Rao, *Kula Nirmulana* (2001) and *Bahujana Keratalu* (2001) edited by Palnati Sriramulu and *Samantara* (2005). However, for various reasons, most of these journals have had short lives.

With the movement for a separate Telangana state, a Telugu daily *Namasthe Telangana* was launched on June 6, 2011, as a brainchild of the leader of the movement K. Chandrasekhar Rao who became the first Chief Minister of the newest Indian state when Telangana state was born on June 2, 2014. Owned by Telangana Publications, the paper is published from all the (previous) ten districts of Telangana. Along with the TV news channel of the same name, it was the mouthpiece of the Telangana movement before the creation of the state and later it played a prominent role in the success of the Telangana Rashtra Samiti in the first elections held to the Telangana Legislative Assembly in April 2014.

The paper was launched basically out of a “historical necessity” to set right the distortions that were inherent in reporting on Telangana, its history, its people and its culture by the Telugu press that was owned and manned by industrialists from the Andhra region. Editor Allam Narayan said,

So far, Telangana people heard and saw through the eyes and ears of Seemandhra (word indicating Rayalaseema and Andhra regions) media. Now Telangana people will see through their own eyes and hear through their own ears ... it will rewrite the history, culture and rich traditions of Telangana people. It will re-tell the injustice done to the region and ... will voice the concerns, aspirations and ambitions of Telangana people.

The slogan for separate statehood has been living in the hearts of Telangana population all through the 60-year history. *Namasthe Telangana* emerges from that urge for freedom. *Namasthe Telangana* will be a newspaper by the people of Telangana, for the people of Telangana and of the people of Telangana. The paper will voice the concerns, aspirations and ambitions of the Telangana people.

(Pandey 2011)

### **Stories of the lives of vulnerable people ignored**

This imbalance in ownership patterns and social and gender representation perhaps partly explains the imbalance in the Indian media's coverage and biased stance with regard to issues of social engineering. While the social and economic crises have overtaken the OBC service and artisanal communities in the era of globalization, and they are being displaced from their traditional caste occupations, and their services rendered irrelevant leading to loss of livelihood, their pauperization, these issues find no mention either in the print or electronic media. Suicides have become the bane of these castes: Goldsmiths, weavers and cotton farmers are taking their lives out of sheer desperation, yet they do not merit any special coverage either in terms of reporting or analyzing the causes and suggesting solutions. The uncertainty of life of the vulnerable people

and of those in the unorganized sector does not move the media. Therefore, there is no pressure on the government, either the union government or the state government to offer succor and solutions to the suffering and the weak.

We can conclude that such issues remain ignored, neglected and unknown to the general reading public thanks to the inherent and deep prejudices of those owning and manning the media towards these people, considering that all of them belong to the “lower” or “lowest” castes and hence, considered too unimportant to bother about. On the other hand, the interests, issues and concerns of the dominant castes are covered day after day. Their problems are projected as the problems of the entire country. Corporate news gets special treatment and special pages in general newspapers while there are exclusive newspapers for business, finance and industry. A new development due to this focus on the urban and privileged people is the emergence of an entire genre of journalism that focuses on the pleasure industry: Entertainment, travel, leisure, food, adventure sports, beauty and fashion, indulgences and so on. They get more space and time than the issues and concerns of the 80 percent of Indians.

The media selectively projects the reality of the country which, in fact, is the reality of a small minority of the powerful, privileged people. The reality of the lives of 80 percent of the people goes unseen, unheeded and unreported. By excluding the majority of the people from their news pages and program content, the media surely cannot be said to be democratic institutions. The media are merely a mirror image of the unequal, hierarchical, caste-ridden society that is India.

### **Caste discrimination within the media**

Why are there so few journalists from the underprivileged castes in the media despite a large number of OBCs, SCs, STs and minorities, especially Muslims, acquiring higher education, getting exposure in cities and towns and participating in social and political movements that have given them awareness, confidence and determination? This is especially true of the regional-language media which is growing across all languages in the country. The situation in the English-language media is very different considering most of those who do seek and get entry into the media are elite, urban-based youngsters who are proficient in both writing and speaking English.

Often three reasons are cited for the OBCs and other suppressed people not getting into the media: One, caste discrimination; two, media do not offer the job security a government job does; and three, finding employment in the private sector requires a social network of connections and recommendations. Even if one manages to get into the media, to remain in the media is a tough call as it requires a thick skin, even courage to withstand the discrimination in assignments, constant direct and indirect criticism, exclusion and bad-mouthing. Very often, unable to take the harassment and overt discrimination, the OBCs and Dalits quit the media. Those who do show enough grit to remain in the profession, remain at the entry level, rarely going up the promotion ladder. Deep prejudice works against them: Their performance is measured not against their efficiency and ability but against social hierarchy. Those denied promotions were even told by their bosses that they feared that if they were promoted to decision-making levels, then those subordinate to them might revolt against taking orders from “lower caste” bosses.

### **Role of social movements**

A survey carried out by this researcher for this study among journalists of the Telugu media found that in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh, there is a fair number of OBC and Dalit professionals working in the media, especially in the rural areas. While there are no statistics, the

number is put between 5 and 15 percent of 10,000-odd journalists in the two states. They are mostly employed as “stringers” at mandal level while some are staffers even in English-language newspapers. A handful even head bureaus. The influx of a fair number of OBC youth into the profession is mostly due to the Maoist movement in the two states which inspired the rural youth of the oppressed castes to identify with its ideology, support it and even join its ranks. Most of foot soldiers and sympathizers of the movement were OBC and Dalit men and women.

Some of them grew to leadership positions, and when they quit the movement for one reason or the other, the media seemed to be the best alternative for these young, thinking and committed men and women. While the landed upper caste former Maoists returned to their land as they had the economic base, those upper-caste former Maoists who did not have such an economic base, fell back on their caste support system and caste network for re-entry into the mainstream of life. But the OBC and Dalit men and women who had no such alternatives found an alternative in the media, according to a journalist working in a Telugu daily newspaper. “Working in the media gives us a sense of satisfaction as we contribute to the betterment of society.” said a former Maoist now working for a Telugu newspaper. Another former Maoist-turned-journalist said media was an opportunity for OBCs and Dalit with some education and who remained committed to society and social justice. “Media serves as an instrument of change. We can contribute to society through it,” he said (Interviews with Journalists during the Survey, 2014–15).

However, although the space created for the OBCs and Dalits is not very large, especially in the mainstream media, the smaller publications do offer an opportunity. Each district has about 10–15 small newspapers where jobs are available for those with a passion for journalism. Detailed conversations with several journalists in Telangana by the author of this chapter broadly suggest the following:

1. Many OBCs/Dalits enter the media because they believe it can empower their community and help focus on issues relating to their community and people. Dalits and OBCs have some presence in the Telugu-language media whereas they are negligible in the English-language media.
2. While discrimination and antagonism against OBC/Dalit journalists is rampant in the Telugu-language media, it is less pronounced in the English-language media.
3. Discrimination is the principal factor behind the decision of OBCs and Dalits to leave the private sector media and opt for government jobs whenever they get the opportunity.
4. Apart from discrimination, they feel a career in the media is a risky proposition. Their weak economic base makes them fear job insecurity which is a defining characteristic of the private sector (Interviews with Journalists during the Survey, 2014–15).

## **Monopoly of upper castes over positions of power in Telugu media**

### ***Print media***

All the leading 12 dailies of the two Telugu states are owned by upper castes and headed by them. Not a single daily is either owned or run by the marginalized people. The case is similar with the position of editor, which is the most powerful and prestigious position in a newspaper. While upper castes are editors of as many as ten out of 12 dailies, there are a mere two editors from OBC communities. There is not a single editor of SC or ST background. As for the position of news bureau chief, 11 out of 12 are from upper castes and a mere one belongs to

Table 27.1 Caste-wise Breakdown of Ownership and Managing Directors of Telugu Newspapers

S. No.	Newspaper	Owner	Managing director
1	Eenadu	Upper caste	Upper caste
2	Sakshi	Upper caste	Upper caste
3	Andhra Jyothi	Upper caste	Upper caste
4	Namaste Telangana	Upper caste	Upper caste
5	Andhra Prabha	Upper caste	Upper caste
6	Andhra Bhoomi	Upper caste	Upper caste
7	Surya	Upper caste	Upper caste
8	Prajasakthi	Upper caste	Upper caste
9	Visalandra	Upper caste	Upper caste
10	Vaarthaa	Upper caste	Upper caste
11	Nav Telangana	Upper caste	Upper caste
12	Mana Telangana	Upper caste	Upper caste

Table 27.2 Caste-wise Breakdown of Editors and Key Decision-makers of Telugu Newspapers

Community	Editor	Bureau chief
Upper caste	10	11
OBC	2	1
SC	0	0
ST	0	0

the OBCs. There is no SC or ST news bureau chief. (See the following tables.) The data were collected through a survey carried out in Hyderabad in January 2017 (Tables 27.1 and 27.2).

### ***Electronic news media***

There are 26 news channels in Telugu and as many as 24 of them are owned by upper castes while one each is owned by an OBC and an SC. No ST owns a Telugu news channel. The case is similar with management of the news channels. Only two channels are managed by BC persons and the rest are managed by upper-caste persons only. We can find no MD or CEOs among the SCs and STs (Table 27.3).

Table 27.4 shows the caste-wise breakdown of key positions of power in the electronic media. As many as 24 out of 26 news channels have editors of upper-caste background while one editor each belongs to the OBC and SC communities. As for the Chief of News Bureau, 24 are “upper” castes and two are from OBCs. There is no editor or bureau chief belonging to the SC and ST communities.

### **Representation of SCs, STs and OBCs in Telugu newspapers**

The media in the two Telugu states of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh are least represented by the marginalized castes, that is SCs, STs and OBCs. Out of 12 daily newspapers only two have

Table 27.3 Caste-wise Breakdown of Ownership, Managing Directors and CEOs of Electronic News Media

Name of the electronic news media	Owner	Managing director/CEO
TV9	Upper caste	Upper caste
ETV	Upper caste	Upper caste
Sakshi TV	Upper caste	Upper caste
ABN Andhra Jyothi	Upper caste	Upper caste
HMTV	Upper caste	Upper caste
NTV	Upper caste	Upper caste
TV5	Upper caste	Upper caste
Zee 24 Hours News Channel	Upper caste	Upper caste
T News	Upper caste	Upper caste
MAHAA TV	Upper caste	Upper caste
i News	Upper caste	Upper caste
V6 News	SC	OBC
Studio N	Upper caste	Upper caste
TNN	OBC	OBC
Deccan TV	Upper caste	Upper caste
6 TV	Upper caste	Upper caste
Jai Telangana News	Upper caste	Upper caste
Express TV	Upper caste	Upper caste
Gemini News	Upper caste	Upper caste
10 TV	Upper caste	Upper caste
99 TV	Upper caste	Upper caste
Bharat Today	Upper caste	Upper caste
C TV	Upper caste	Upper caste
CVR Channel	Upper caste	Upper caste
Metro TV and Mega TV	Upper caste	Upper caste
Raj News	Upper caste	Upper caste

Table 27.4 Caste-wise Breakdown of Owners, Managing Directors, CEOs and Key Decision-makers in Electronic Media

Community	Owner	Managing director/CEO	Editor/in-charge	Bureau chief	(n = 26)
Upper caste	24	24	24	24	
OBC	1	1	1	1	
SC	1	1	1	1	
ST	0	0	0	0	

OBCs as editors while only one newspaper has an OBC as a news head. Out of 69 bureau chiefs in the print media, only two belong to the SC community and none is from the ST community; only three belong to the OBCs. Out of 79 desk-in-charges, six are from OBCs and not a single desk-in-charge belongs to the SC community and none from the ST community. The rest belong to the upper castes (see Tables 27.5 and 27.6).

Table 27.5 Caste-wise Breakdown of Editorial Staff of Telugu Newspapers

S. No.	Newspaper	Total editorial staff	SC	ST	OBC	Percentage
1.	Eenadu	435	10 (2.5%)	Nil	12 (2.7%)	
2.	Sakshi	380	7 (1.8%)	Nil	9 (2.3%)	
3.	Andhra Jyoti	280	7 (2.5%)	Nil	9 (3.2%)	
4.	Namasthe Telangana	109	6 (5.5%)	Nil	12 (11%)	
5.	Andhra Prabha	133	5 (3.7%)	Nil	7 (5.2%)	
6.	Andhra Bhoomi	136	5 (3.6%)	Nil	9 (6.6%)	
7.	Surya	25	5 (20%)	Nil	12 (48%)	
8.	Prajashakti	141	10 (7.0%)	Nil	10 (7.0%)	
9.	Visalandhra	82	3 (3.6%)	Nil	7 (8.4%)	
10.	Vaartha	132	6 (4.5%)	Nil	12 (9.0%)	
11.	Nav Telangana	112	5 (4.4) %	Nil	13 (11%)	
12.	Mana Telangana	103	6 (5.8%)	Nil	9 (8.7%)	
13.	Total	2,068 (100%)	75 (3.63%)	Nil	121 (5.85%)	

With regard to the situation of editorial staff such as news reporters, desk-in-charges and so on, out of a total of 2,068, again the upper castes are predominant with 1,879 in various posts while a mere 121 belong to the OBCs, 75 to SC communities and only 1 to a ST community. Out of the 26 media houses, only two had OBCs as editor-in-charge/CEO and two bureau chiefs.

Table 27.7 shows that out of 26 channels, 24 editors-in-charge belong to upper castes and only two channels' decision-makers are OBCs. Almost all the important decisions of what goes into the channel are taken by the upper castes. Among the total number of journalists of 1,374, only 9.6 percent (132) belongs to OBCs, 5.8 percent (81) belongs to SCs and 0.2 percent (4) to STs. The predominance of the upper castes, who constitute a whopping 84.1 percent (1,156) in the Telugu news channels, clearly proves the totally skewed position in terms of control over Telugu news.

Table 27.8 clearly shows that the representation of decision-makers and journalists belonging to marginalized communities is almost nonexistent in the English-language press in Hyderabad. While there is not a single Dalit journalist, there are a mere five OBC journalists on the rolls of the English-language press.

### **Accredited journalists**

The situation of journalists accredited by the government reveals a similar situation. Accreditation is the recognition by the government of a media representative as a journalist which gives him/

Table 27.6 Caste-wise Breakdown of Editors, Bureau Chiefs and Decision-makers in Telugu Newspapers

Decision-maker	SC	ST	OBC	Upper caste	Total
Editor	0	0	2 (16.7%)	10 (83.3%)	12
News editor	0	0	0	12 (100%)	12
Bureau chief	2 (2.89%)	0	3 (4.34%)	64 (92.7%)	69
Desk in-charge	0	0	6 (7.59%)	73 (92.4%)	79

her access to government departments and, apart from other benefits, to facilitate the reporters to do their duty (see Table 27.9).

A caste-wise analysis of accredited journalists in Telangana shows that an overwhelming 91.4 percent belong to upper castes while OBCs constitute a mere 7.08 percent, the SCs 1.83 percent and STs a nominal 0.21 percent.

### Composition of the Press Academy of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana

The case is similar to the Andhra Pradesh Press Academy that is run by the government and is headed by a prominent media person as chairman. The chairman is appointed by the government with the powers and privileges equivalent to that of a cabinet minister. The Press Academy was established in 1996 in the undivided Andhra Pradesh. To date there have been seven chairmen and governing councils of the Press Academy. No person from the OBC, SC or ST communities has been the chairman of the Academy so far. Out of the 76 members of the executive board and the governing council of the Press Academy so far, who are selected from journalists, academics and other social scientists, not a single member belonged to either the SCs or STs while a small number belonged to the OBCs. However, after the creation of Telangana state, the first chairman of the Telangana Press Academy is from the OBCs. The governing council has one SC member but no ST members.

### Conclusion

We can conclude from the data and discussion in this chapter that the Indian media, both print and electronic are monopolistic and exclusionary, with the “upper” castes retaining and deepening their casteist hold over the media. The media have refused to move with the times to introduce diversity both in their staff and the issues they cover. The traditionally privileged people lord it over in every single department and in all aspects of news-gathering and opinion-writing. The traditionally excluded people like the OBCs, SCs and STs get little chance of breaking into this citadel of the traditionally privileged castes. The newsrooms of both the newspapers and news channels are singularly marked by lack of diversity of staff in terms of caste, lack of diversity in coverage of the marginalized people, and of multiplicity of opinions and analyses.

The inclusion of the traditionally excluded people in the media works in two ways: One, it paves the way for diversity in the newsroom and the news pages in terms of expanding topics of coverage and bringing under the gaze of the public the unique issues facing the lesser people in our society. Impartial and unbiased coverage of the underprivileged and the disadvantaged communities could pave the way for better focus of the policy makers on their issues and even get some of them solved. Importantly, the news pages would reflect the society and familiarize the readers with aspects of the people that do not normally figure in the news. Even if the mere presence of a Dalit or an OBC or a Muslim in the newsroom or on the rolls of the newspaper

Table 27.7 Caste-wise Breakdown of Journalists Working for Telugu TV News Channels

Name of the media organization	Editor/in-charge/ CEO	Bureau chief	Total journalists/ news staff	SC	ST	OBC	Upper caste
TV9	Upper caste	Upper caste	90	6 (6%)	Nil	9 (10%)	
ETV	Upper caste	Upper caste	87	4 (4.5%)	Nil	7 (8%)	
Sakshi TV	Upper caste	Upper caste	99	4 (4%)	Nil	6 (6%)	
ABN/Andhra Jyothi	Upper caste	OBC	67	3 (4.4%)	Nil	5 (7.4%)	
HMTV	Upper caste	Upper caste	70	5 (7.1%)	Nil	9 (12%)	
NTV	Upper caste	Upper caste	76	3 (3.9%)	Nil	5 (6.5%)	
TV5 Zee 24 Hours	Upper caste Upper caste	Upper caste Upper caste	60 70	1 (1.6%) 4 (5.7%)	Nil Nil	3 (5%) 4 (5.7%)	
T News	Upper caste	Upper caste	60	2 (3.3%)	Nil	4 (6.6%)	
MAHAA	Upper caste	Upper caste	50	1 (2%)	Nil	2 (4%)	
i News	Upper caste	Upper caste	41	2 (4.8%)	Nil	3 (7.3%)	
V6	OBC	Upper caste	58	10 (17.2%)	3 (5.1%)	13 (22.4%)	
Studio N	Upper caste	Upper caste	58	3 (5.1%)	Nil	11 (18.9%)	

(Continued)

Table 27.7 (Continued)

Name of the media organization	Editor/in-charge/ CEO	Bureau chief	Total journalists/ news staff	SC	ST	OBC	Upper caste
TNN Deccan TV	OBC Upper caste	OBC Upper caste	36 32	6 (16.6%) 4 (12.5%)	1 (2.7%) Nil	13 (36.1%) 6	(18.7%)
6TV	Upper caste	Upper caste	40	4 (10%)	Nil	5	(12.5%)
Jai Telangana News	Upper caste	Upper caste	35	1 (2.8%)	Nil	2 (5.7%)	
Express TV	Upper caste	Upper caste	43	3 (6.9%)	Nil	3	(6.9%)
Gemini News	Upper caste	Upper caste	62	3 (4.8%)	Nil	3	(4.8%)
10 TV	Upper caste	Upper caste	56	5 (8.9%)	Nil	7 (12.7%)	
99 TV Bharat Today	Upper caste Upper caste	Upper caste Upper caste	50 24	4 (8%) 1 (4.1%)	Nil Nil	6 (12%) 2	(8.3%)
CTV	Upper caste	Upper caste	34	1 (2.9%)	Nil	2	(5.8%)
CVR Channel	Upper caste	Upper caste	38	1 (2.6%)	Nil	2	(5.2%)
Metro TV and Mega TV Raj News Total: 26	Upper caste Upper caste Upper caste 24 OBC 2 (92%)	Upper caste Upper caste Upper caste 24 OBC 2 (92%)	20 18 1374 (5.8%)	Nil Nil 81 (0.2%)	Nil Nil 4 (9.6%)	2 (10%) 1 (5.5%) 132 (84.4%)	1,157

*Table 27.8 Caste-wise Breakdown of Newspaper Ownership and Decision-makers in Hyderabad-based English-language Newspapers*

<i>English newspapers</i>	<i>Ownership</i>	<i>Resident editor</i>	<i>News editor</i>	<i>Bureau chief</i>
Deccan Chronicle	Upper caste	Upper caste	Upper caste	Upper caste
The Times of India	Upper caste	Upper caste	Upper caste	Upper caste
The Hindu	Upper caste	Upper caste	Upper caste	Upper caste
The Indian Express	Upper caste	Upper caste	Upper caste	Upper caste
The Hans India	Upper caste	Upper caste	Upper caste	Upper caste

*Table 27.9 Caste-wise Breakdown of Accredited Journalists in the Telangana Media in 2016*

<i>Caste</i>	<i>No. of accredited journalists (Total 926)</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Upper caste	847	91.4
OBC	60	7.08
SC	17	1.83
ST	2	0.21
Total	926	100

Source: Directorate of Information and Public Relations, Telangana State, 2016.

may not make a huge difference since they do not wield the power of a decision-maker, it will normalize the atmosphere instead of the newsrooms becoming islands of caste and gender privilege. In terms of coverage of the different societies of the excluded people, the narratives would be more balanced, objective, empathetic and unbiased if the unprivileged were assigned to those stories. Representation of the people by their own people leads to more diversified content, relevant to their lives, and hopefully, less biased writing.

The Indian media, both Telugu- and English-language media, have failed to live up to the role as an agent of social change, and to spread awareness of the situation of the marginalized and the disadvantaged people of society. They have failed as conscience-keepers of society. The media have remained totally conservative, mirroring the social biases, prejudices and discrimination that go against the inherent role of the media as a champion of the underdog. Also, importantly, their policies of recruitment violate the constitutional rights of equality and equal opportunity.

Even as change is sweeping the world of media in other countries, especially the developed ones, the Telugu media maintain the status quo. To date, no media organization has tried to set right the imbalance by putting in place recruitment policies that will identify, train and absorb men and women of talent from among the oppressed castes as a part of their social responsibility. It seems that the Telugu media find it easier to preach equality in their editorials than to practice it. To that extent, the media are hypocritical, doing a disservice to their traditional role as defender of people's rights. They have lost the right to claim to be the Fourth Estate, as one of the pillars upholding democracy. They cannot claim to be the conscience of society when they practice casteism and exclusion, when it further deepens the entrenched caste prejudices,

injustices and discrimination against the oppressed people of its society. Far from being a change agent, the Telugu media continue to strengthen the hold of the traditionally privileged people. The media seem to serve none other than their own kind and their own vested interests. Instead of being a mirror of society, reflecting the social realities to the people so that change can be brought about in the attitudes, behavior and opinion of the people and grow towards equality, the media serve as one of the barometers of the prejudices, discrimination and injustices that have been the lot of the majority of people in society. They ensure that the oppressed remain in the chains of low status, lacking in dignity, denied social justice and opportunity to break free.

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# 28

## THE OBC VOTE IN NORTH INDIA

### Trends and patterns

*Sanjay Kumar and Pranav Gupta*

The massive victory of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the 2014 and 2019 Lok Sabha elections and the alignment and realignment of different political parties including those committed to the cause of the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) such as Janata Dal, could well be a significant milestone in OBC politics in North India. These developments are not to be seen in isolation. They should probably be looked at in the context of broader long-term changes in the voting behavior of OBCs in North India beginning from the *Mandal-Kamandal* phase. After the advent of “Mandal” politics in the late 1980s, OBCs became the most important social group in the politics of North India. Banking on the Mandal sentiment and promises of backward class empowerment, the Janata Dal gained power in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. The BJP tried to counter “Mandal” through “Kamandal” (Hindutva), which was aimed at creating a cross-caste support base among Hindus. The contemporary relevance of “Mandal” and “Kamandal” might be relatively less, but leaders who had emerged during these movements still continue to control North Indian politics.

In this chapter, we provide a broad overview of OBC politics in North India and Alok Sabha study some specific aspects of it. We seek to answer four key questions in this chapter. First, what is the broad voting pattern of OBCs in the Lok Sabha elections between 1996 and 2014? Second, are there any inter-state differences in the voting pattern of OBCs? Third, do OBCs vote similarly in Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabha (assembly) elections? Fourth, can OBCs be considered to be a homogenous social category when it comes to voting? Each of these aspects has individually influenced the party system and electoral competition in the region in some manner.

The analysis in this chapter is based on empirical evidence from a series of Post-Poll Surveys conducted by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies during various national and assembly elections between 1996 and 2014. We conclude with a look into the future, on how the nature of backward class politics in the Hindi heartland is likely to change in subsequent years.

#### How OBCs vote: The national picture

It is quite evident in Table 28.1 that there is no clear trend in support among OBCs for the two national parties with less than one-quarter of them having voted for each of the parties from

Table 28.1 Voting Patterns of OBCs in India: Overall for Lok Sabha Elections 1996–2014 (in Percentage)

The OBCs voted for:	1996	1999	2004	2009	2014
Congress (All India)	25	24	24	24	15
BJP (All India)	19	23	23	22	34
Congress in bi-polar contest against BJP	38	49	43	40	23
BJP in bi-polar contest against Congress	44	49	52	51	67
Congress in states where contest is between Congress, BJP and regional parties	22	17	16	20	16
BJP in states where contest is between Congress, BJP and regional parties	24	22	24	26	39
Congress in states where contest is between Congress and regional parties	22	22	25	23	11
BJP in states where contest is between Congress and regional parties	5	12	9	5	12

Source: *National Election Studies 1996–2014* conducted by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS).

1999 to 2009. It is only during the 2014 Lok Sabha elections that we see a dramatic change in pattern as the BJP took a 19-percentage point lead over the Congress. Overall, the combined vote share of the BJP and the Congress among OBCs has ranged from 45 to 49 percent.

We categorize states into three groups to locate OBC supporters of the two national parties. The first group consists of states like Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan where the BJP and the Congress are in direct contest with each other. In the second group we included states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Maharashtra where the Congress, the BJP and regional parties are present. In the third group, we included states like West Bengal, Kerala and Odisha where political contest is mainly between the Congress and regional players and the BJP only has a marginal presence.

We find unique voting patterns among OBCs in each category. In bipolar states we see a gradual decline in support for the Congress from 2004 onwards. The BJP, on the other hand, has continuously gained and received support from more than half of the OBCs in these states. In 2014, the BJP managed to draw support from close to two-thirds of all OBC voters in these states. At no point until 2014 had the Congress and the BJP combined support of more than half of the OBC voters in the second group of states. Also, the former has always trailed the latter in these states. The difference between the two parties has always been less than 10 percentage points except in 2014 when it increased to 23 points. In 2014, the Congress's own vote share declined by just 4 percentage points, but the BJP made massive gains from the regional parties. The BJP's vote share in this group, which remained almost constant until 2009, increased by 13 percentage points in the 2014 elections. In the third group, the Congress used to consistently get more than one-fifth of the OBC votes. The BJP, on the other hand, has marginal presence in these states and its performance depended on whether it had an alliance with regional parties. Even in 2014, OBC support for the BJP in these states should be attributed largely to its alliance with the Telegu Desam Party (TDP) in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana and smaller regional parties in Tamil Nadu. Each group has distinct patterns which help in mapping the voting behavior of OBCs. We shall focus exclusively on OBCs in North India in this chapter.

Our analysis in this section focuses on multiple political parties—Congress, BJP, Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and the Janata Parivar splinter groups. The vote share for the latter has been

### The OBC vote in North India

*Table 28.2 Voting Pattern of OBCs in North India (Lok Sabha Elections 1996 – 2014) (in Percentage)*

Party	1996	1999	2004	2009	2014
Congress	22	18	14	21	12
BJP	28	23	24	23	40
BSP	7	4	7	7	5
RJD/JDU/SP/INLD	22	30	28	27	21
Others	21	25	27	20	22

Source: *National Election Studies 1996–2014* conducted by CSDS.

taken together as they have limited presence outside their respective strongholds. Support for the Congress among OBCs in North India continued to dip till 2004 and then rose sharply in 2009 from 14 percentage points to 21 points (one and a half times). Could this be because of the improved performance of the party in Uttar Pradesh in the 2009 Lok Sabha election? The BJP had almost a constant share of OBC votes in the region between 1999 and 2014. Interestingly, the BJP's all-India OBC vote share was lowest in 1996 (Table 28.1) when it had performed quite well among them in North India. In fact, until 2009, its vote share among OBCs remained 4 to 5 percentage points lower than the 1996 figure. Connecting Table 28.1 and Table 28.2, one can argue that *Kamandal* did help the BJP in mobilizing a substantial section of the OBCs in North India. The BJP's best performance has been in 2014 when four out of every ten OBC voters in North India voted for it. In the state-wise analysis presented in the next section we would be able to identify where this increase came from. The "Janata Parivar" also had steady support from 1999 to 2009. The combined vote share of the four key splinter groups has been marginally more than one fourth. The 1996 and 2014 elections are probably the only years when this group did not have the highest vote share among OBCs.

Except for the 2014 Lok Sabha election, support among the OBCs in North India has been highly fragmented in the last two decades. No party before the last election had ever managed to get more than 40 percent of the vote among them. This is possible if there are high inter-state variations or heterogeneity within OBCs or both.

### How OBCs vote: The state-wise patterns

In this section, we disaggregate our data to check for state-level variations in the voting pattern (Tables 28.3 to Table 28.7). This will not only help in explaining broader trends of OBC voting but also provide a nuanced understanding of politics in these states.

In Bihar, the OBC voters have mainly supported the BJP, Janata Dal (United) (JD(U)) and the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD). The 1996 election was the first general election after the split in the Janata Dal. Laloo Prasad Yadav's party had registered a massive victory in the 1995 assembly election and continued its dominance in the 1996 Lok Sabha election getting the highest vote share among the OBCs. The BJP at this stage used to be the second biggest recipient of OBC votes, probably due to the active Hindutva movement. The RJD's highest vote share ever among OBCs was in the 2000 Vidhan Sabha (State Legislative Assembly) Election when it was leading over the BJP and JDU combine by more than 12 percentage points. This was essentially due to a heavy consolidation of Yadav voters and marginal inroads made among Kurmi-Koeris and Lower OBCs (Kumar 2000). After that election, the RJD never managed to get higher support than the BJP-JDU combine. The latter's lead over the former increased from mere 6 percentage

*Table 28.3 Voting Pattern of OBCs in Bihar (in Percentage)*

	1996 Lok Sabha	1999 Lok Sabha	2000 Assembly	2004 Lok Sabha	2005 Assembly	2009 Lok Sabha	2010 Assembly	2014 Lok Sabha
Congress	8	13	7	3	5	6	3	9
BJP	21	14	16	12	16	14	19	26
RJD	34	28	40	30	32	23	21	24
JDU	16	33	12	25	22	29	26	16

Source: *National Election Studies 1996–2014* and *Bihar Post Poll Surveys 2000, 2005 and 2010* conducted by CSDS.

Note: Samata Party in 1996 has been included with JDU

*Table 28.4 Voting Pattern of OBCs in Haryana (in Percentage)*

	1999 Lok Sabha	2000 Assembly	2004 Lok Sabha	2005 Assembly	2009 Lok Sabha	2014 Lok Sabha	2014 Assembly
Congress	46	31	48	53	51	13	20
BJP	13	12	16	11	9	43	40
INLD	16	15	16	28	7	23	21

Source: *National Election Studies 1999–2014* and *Haryana Assembly Election Post Poll Surveys 2000, 2005 and 2014* conducted by CSDS.

*Table 28.5 Voting Pattern of OBCs in Madhya Pradesh (in Percentage)*

	1996 Lok Sabha	1998 Assembly	1999 Lok Sabha	2003 Assembly	2004 Lok Sabha	2008 Assembly	2009 Lok Sabha	2013 Assembly	2014 Lok Sabha
Congress	32	28	40	25	27	20	37	35	19
BJP	36	48	56	50	57	43	46	44	67
BSP	5	4	3	8	5	7	5	8	4

Source: *National Election Studies 1996–2014* and *Madhya Pradesh Assembly Election Post Poll Surveys 1998, 2003, 2008 and 2013* conducted by CSDS.

points in October 2005 to more than 20 points in 2010 assembly election. In fact, in the 2010 election, the BJP received almost equal support as the RJD despite contesting fewer seats. The 2014 Lok Sabha election was the first instance when the BJP overtook other parties among the OBCs in Bihar.

Though the politics of Haryana has been dominated by Jats, OBCs continue to exercise considerable influence in many regions of the state. In fact, South Haryana is known as Ahirwal due to the high concentration of the Ahirs/Yada in the region. The OBCs in Haryana stood by

*The OBC vote in North India*

*Table 28.6 Voting Pattern of OBCs in Rajasthan (in Percentage)*

	1996 Lok Sabha	1998 Assembly	1999 Lok Sabha	2003 Assembly	2004 Lok Sabha	2008 Assembly	2009 Lok Sabha	2013 Assembly	2014 Lok Sabha
Congress	52	33	55	34	37	32	37	27	27
BJP	47	41	45	42	54	41	42	53	58

Source: *National Election Studies 1996–2014* and *Rajasthan Assembly Election Post Poll Surveys 1998, 2003, 2008 and 2013* conducted by CSDS.

*Table 28.7 Voting Pattern of OBCs in Uttar Pradesh (in Percentage)*

	1996 Lok Sabha	1999 Lok Sabha	2002 Assembly	2004 Lok Sabha	2007 Assembly	2009 Lok Sabha	2012 Assembly	2014 Lok Sabha
Congress	7	7	6	14	7	17	11	9
BJP	39	26	21	23	18	18	15	49
BSP	23	12	15	14	21	14	16	7
SP	24	41	30	36	35	40	42	26

Source: *National Election Studies 1996–2014* and *Uttar Pradesh Assembly Election Post Poll Surveys 2002, 2007 and 2012* conducted by CSDS.

the Congress from 1999 until the 2009 Lok Sabha election. In the 2014 Lok Sabha and assembly elections the BJP emerged as the largest party in the state, due to a large proportion of OBC votes it got in these two elections. There is a clear pattern of the OBCs moving towards the BJP during these two elections. In the 2014 assembly election the OBCs helped the BJP immensely in building a non-Jat social coalition. The role of the OBCs in the BJP's victory is evident by its performance in the South Haryana region (Kumar 2014).

In Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, in the absence of regional parties, the OBCs have remained with the two national parties. The BJP has a lead over the Congress since the 1996 Lok Sabha Election in Madhya Pradesh and since the 2003 assembly election in Rajasthan. In Madhya Pradesh the gap between the two parties increased from 4 percentage points to close to 50 points in the 2014 Lok Sabha election. The lowest gap between the two parties in Madhya Pradesh has been 9 points in the 2009 Lok Sabha election. In Rajasthan, the Congress has led the BJP in only two elections since 1996—the 1996 and 1999 Lok Sabha election.

Support among the OBCs is most fragmented in Uttar Pradesh where four main parties and many smaller parties compete for it. In the last 19 years, the BJP has led over all other parties only in two elections, in the 1996 and 2014 Lok Sabha elections. Support for the party among the OBCs steadily declined after 1996. After having stabilized at close to one-sixth between 2007 and 2012, support for the party shot up to 49 percent in 2014. The Samajwadi Party (SP) has been the best performer among OBCs in Uttar Pradesh over the last two decades as close to four out of ten OBC voters have consistently voted for it. This is largely because the Yadav voters have remained more or less loyal to the SP election after election. The BSP has never performed well among the OBCs, and its best performance had come way back in 1996 when it had received 23 percent votes among them in the state. The 2007 assembly election witnessed

return of the OBC voters towards the BSP but the very next election witnessed declining support of the OBCs for the BSP. It would be wrong to say that the party has never targeted OBC voters as the party has consistently given a high proportion of tickets to OBCs. The Congress has never been able to do well among OBCs in the post-Mandal phase. The party's best performance in the last 19 years had been during the 2009 Lok Sabha election when it had won just under one-fifth of the OBC votes (17 percent). The 2007 election in the state was unique as it is the only instance in the period under study when a party won an election without leading among the OBCs. This was possible through a social alliance of Dalits and upper castes that the BSP had built (Verma 2007).

We would like to make two broad arguments based on the empirical evidence presented in this section. First, in all states under study except Uttar Pradesh (UP), there are no differences in voting patterns between Lok Sabha and assembly elections. In UP, the national parties tend to get relatively higher votes in the Lok Sabha elections. Second, we clearly see inter-state variations in the dynamics of OBC voting. Their role in determining electoral outcomes is not similar across states.

### **OBC not a monolithic block: How various castes within the OBC vote**

It is incorrect to consider OBCs to be a homogeneous social group. In each state, many individual *Jatis* and subcastes have been classified as OBCs. In Uttar Pradesh for instance, there are close to 79 subcastes within OBCs (Verma 2001). Inter-caste rivalries are often considered to be more serious than inter-caste conflict (Verma 2010). This probably allows political parties to mobilize specific subgroups within the broad category of OBCs. In Figure 28.1 we see the broad subdivisions among OBCs in the Hindi heartland. The YadaAssembly, Kurmi-Koeris and Lodhis can be identified as Upper OBCs while the rest can be grouped as Lower OBCs.

We compare the voting pattern of YadaAssembly, Kurmi-Koeris and other OBC voters in three states—Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh. Data presented in Tables 28.8, 28.9 and 28.10 clearly show that OBCs are not a homogenous group in terms of their voting behavior.

OBC politics in Bihar took a major turn after the split in the Janata Dal due to the political rift between Laloo Prasad Yadav and Nitish Kumar. The backward castes in the state also divided into two blocs with the former representing the YadaAssembly and the latter representing the Kurmi-Koeris (Kumar 2008). The Muslim-Yadav alliance formed by Laloo Prasad Yadav was an

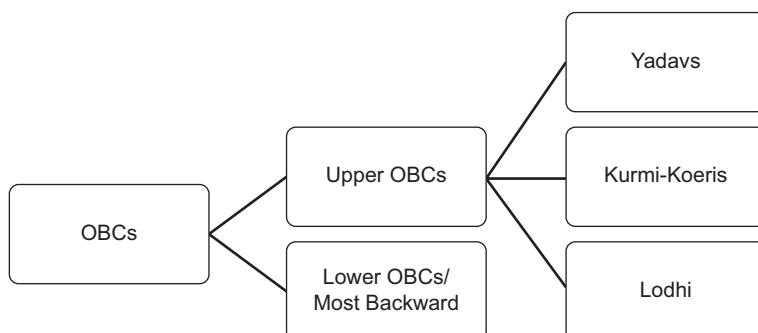


Figure 28.1 Subdivisions within OBCs in North India. Source: Chandra, Kanchan (1999), "Post-Congress Politics in Uttar Pradesh," in Indian Politics and the 1998 Elections: Regionalism, Hindutva and State Politics, ed. By Ramashray Roy and Charles Wallace, Sage Publications, New Delhi.

*The OBC vote in North India*

*Table 28.8 Voting Pattern within OBCs in Bihar (in Percentage)*

		1996	1999	2000	2004	2005	2009	2010	2014
YadaAssembly	Congress	3*	32	3	3	8	4	2	18
	BJP	22*	5	3	8	5	4	6	15
	JD <sup>U</sup>	7*	14	5	7	7	10	9	6
	RJD	59*	48	74	52	64	54	56	46
Kurmi-Koeris	Congress	6*	9*	9	2	3	4	5	1
	BJP	43*	38*	25	9	20	19	22	16
	JD <sup>U</sup>	17*	33*	26	62	43	43	37	31
	RJD	17*	13*	23	10	13	5	5	13
Other OBCs	Congress	11	3	8	2	4	9	3	4
	BJP	13	13	17	16	24	20	25	43
	JD <sup>U</sup>	19	43	10	21	24	37	30	19
	RJD	29	20	24	26	18	9	8	8

Source: *National Election Studies 1996–2014* and *Bihar Assembly Election Post Poll Surveys 2000, 2005 and 2010* conducted by CSDS.

\*Low Sample Size

Note: Samata Party in 1996, 1999 and 2000 has been included with the JD<sup>U</sup>. Figures for 2005 are for the election held in October 2005.

*Table 28.9 Voting Pattern within OBCs in Uttar Pradesh (in Percentage)*

		1996	1999	2002	2004	2007	2009	2012	2014
YadaAssembly	Congress	11*	2	5	7	4	10	5	8
	BJP	17*	8	5	5	4	6	10	28
	SP	53*	83	71	71	72	73	66	52
	BSP	11*	3	5	9	8	5	11	3
Kurmi-Koeris	Congress	5	6	6	17	8	26	14	16
	BJP	38	33	35	29	21	17	20	52
	SP	15	23	13	12	19	21	35	17
	BSP	29	10	16	19	28	19	19	4
Other OBCs	Congress	7	9	8	16	8	17	15	8
	BJP	49	27	23	28	18	25	17	60
	SP	16	29	20	28	19	27	26	13
	BSP	21	22	23	15	28	21	19	12

Source: *National Election Studies 1996–2014* and *Uttar Pradesh Assembly Election Post Poll Surveys 2002, 2007 and 2012* conducted by CSDS.

\*Low Sample Size

electoral success in the state for his party. Even today no party has been able to make inroads into the Yadav votebank of the RJD and it continues to remain the primary choice for most people from the community.

After the split in the Janata Dal which occurred primarily due to the undue favors and preferences granted by the Laloo government to the YadaAssembly (Thakur 2014), Nitish Kumar had to tie up with the BJP to form a stable and formidable social coalition. The upper castes in the state have traditionally supported the BJP and an alliance between the BJP and the JD<sup>U</sup>

Table 28.10 Voting Pattern within OBCs in Madhya Pradesh (in Percentage)

		1996	1999	2003	2004	2008	2009	2013	2014
YadaAssembly	Congress	19*	-	23	21*	28	45	25	16*
	BJP	40*	-	57	63*	38	37	59	70*
	BSP	4*	-	10	5*	8	4	5	5*
Kurmi-Koeris	Congress	33*	35*	20	39*	11	25*	25	19
	BJP	17*	58*	57	57*	44	51*	38	60
	BSP	15*	7*	12	5*	3	2*	16	10
Other OBCs	Congress	37	41	27	25	18	32	37	20
	BJP	36	56	51	56	45	49	41	69
	BSP	3	2	5	5	8	6	6	2

Source: *National Election Studies 1996–2014* and *Madhya Pradesh Assembly Election Post Poll Surveys 1998, 2003, 2008 and 2013* conducted by CSDS.

\* Low Sample Size

in Bihar led to the creation of an Upper Caste–non-Yadav social coalition against the RJD. Nitish Kumar led this alliance in Bihar with the agenda—“*Agada, Pichada Ek Ho*” (the forwards and backward are one) (Gaikwad 2013). The consolidation of the Kurmi voters in favor of the two parties was a major factor behind their successive electoral victories in the state between 2005 and 2010. Their alliance was also able to take a large share of the vote among other OBCs, reducing the RJD’s support to mainly Muslims and YadaAssembly.

The breaking up of the BJP and JDU alliance after the elevation of Narendra Modi made the 2014 Lok Sabha election a three-way contest. The aggressive campaigning by the BJP helped it in drawing from all sections of the OBCs including the YadaAssembly. The party tried to fragment the core support groups of the RJD and JDU—YadaAssembly and Kurmis, respectively, and consolidate among other sections of the Hindus. The BJP alone was supported by more than 40 percent of the Kurmis.

Since 1999, the SP has consistently received support from more than 70 percent of the Yadav voters in the state. The Kurmi and Koeri voters in UP have remained fragmented between multiple parties. In the state’s politics, they can be considered to be a “floating votebank” which could shift between parties to tilt the balance (Mishra 1997). Support for the BJP among the Kurmi-Koeris almost halved between 1996 and 2009 from 38 percent to 17 percent. In the 1990s, the Congress used to get only a fraction of OBC support in the state. A Congress revival in Uttar Pradesh did seem possible when the party performed quite well among the Kurmis and other OBCs in the 2009 election. Encouraged by this performance, they consciously decided to build a Muslim–Kurmi social coalition to repeat this success in the 2012 assembly election. The only election in the past in which the BSP has managed some success among the OBCs is the 2007 assembly election. In 2007, the party performed better than others among the non-Yadav OBCs. Why has the BSP, which continues to receive substantial support among the Dalits, not been able to expand its social base to include OBCs? In most elections, the non-Yadav OBCs have not delivered any clear verdict and have become fragmented. The BJP’s success in the 2014 Lok Sabha election in Uttar Pradesh can be attributed greatly to an unprecedented consolidation of OBC voters. The party managed to get support from more than half of the Kurmis and Lower OBCs. Also, for the first time ever, it managed to make inroads into the stable Yadav support base of the SP and drew a vote share of 28 percent among them. The BJP’s 2014 social bloc is essentially an extension of the winning combination of the 1990s. In the early 1990s, the

BJP had tried to expand among the backward castes through OBC leaders like Kalyan Singh and Uma Bharti.

We believe that there are four inter-related factors which have enabled political parties to mobilize subgroups within OBCs in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. First, greater political competition in the state has meant that the threshold level of the vote share required for winning elections is lower. Thus, a stable alliance with even a few *Jati* groups can provide a large number of seats. Second, as mentioned above the leaders of various splinter groups of the Janata parivar themselves represented specific *Jati* groups and none of them have been able to emerge as a leader of the larger social category—OBCs. Third, during Mulayam Singh Yadav's rule in Uttar Pradesh and Laloo Prasad Yadav's in Bihar, there were widespread allegations of undue favors and concessions from the state machinery to the Yadav community (Thakur 2014; Bose 2008). Fourth, the benefits of reservation granted to the OBCs were disproportionately taken by the dominant OBC groups like YadaAssembly and Kurmis (Verma 2001). The last two factors particularly led to widespread resentment against the dominant OBCs and the Lower OBCs emerged as a separate social category/group.

In recent years, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar have seen an emergence of various smaller parties led by leaders having significant support among specific *Jati* groups. These parties do not have enough resources and/or spatially concentrated electoral strength to perform well on their own especially in Lok Sabha elections. Entering into an alliance with bigger parties is mutually beneficial as they provide a key swing vote in multi-polar contests and increase their own chances of winning seats. In the 2014 election, the BJP tied up with late Dr Sonelal Patel's Apna Dal in Uttar Pradesh and Upendra Kushwaha led the Rashtriya Lok Samata Party in Bihar. These parties helped the BJP in gaining Kurmi votes in eastern UP and Koeri votes Bihar respectively (PTI 2014; Gaikwad 2014). The Congress tied up with Mahan Dal, founded by Keshav Dev Maurya, which is known to have some support among the Maurya, Khushwaha, Shakya, Saini and Kamboj communities in western UP (Das 2014).

In Madhya Pradesh, where there is a simple two-party system, and we hardly witness clear differences in the voting pattern of subgroups. In most elections since 1996, there have been no major differences in voting patterns within OBCs. Usually, all subcastes within the OBCs have voted for the same party. In Madhya Pradesh, even the Yadavs vote for the two national parties which hardly get any support among this community in UP and Bihar.

While interpreting the trends and patterns we should not ignore the “winner effect.” Whenever a party performs exceedingly well overall, it sees an increase in support for it across social categories. Thus, before drawing any conclusions on shifts of a social group towards a party, we should check the magnitude and evaluate reasons behind it.

### **Looking at the future: Fate of OBC politics in North India**

The voting pattern of the OBCs in future elections depends on three independent factors which could change the voting behavior of OBCs in North India. First is a shift towards politics of development and growing importance of class identity. Many scholars argue that class has become more important than caste in determining voting behavior. Verma (2010) discusses the emergence of a subaltern class comprising of economically weaker sections from all caste groups. In such a scenario, parties would not limit their focus to specific social groups and would reach out to the poor across caste lines. Jaffrelot (2015) hypothesizes that the “neo-middle class” (those who have come out of poverty recently and require state support for staying in the middle class) are essentially OBCs. He discusses how class is becoming more influential than caste and the rise of a “neo-middle class” within the OBCs is leading to their shift towards the BJP.

Verma (2014) explains how the BJP pursued inclusive politics in the 2014 Lok Sabha election in UP and tried to mobilize voters on the agenda of development. He believes that the success of this strategy hints towards a decline of caste politics in the state. Kumar (2014) discusses how there, caste politics did not completely disappear, but development did become one of the most important issues in the minds of the voters in the 2010 Bihar elections.

Second, talks are ongoing for a merger of the Janata Parivar splinter groups under the leadership of Mulayam Singh Yadav. The united political entity would also bring old friends turned foes Laloo Prasad Yadav and Nitish Kumar together after close to two decades. A few months after the Lok Sabha defeat, Laloo Prasad Yadav first spoke about the feasibility of an alliance between all splinter groups of the Janata Dal. Addressing a party event, he said “The Mandal Commission is a bomb which RJD workers should be ready to ignite.” He urged parties connected with the “Mandal” concept of social justice to unite (PTI 2014). The merger is based on the simple political objective of consolidating support among all sections of OBCs.

Third, the recurring demands by many social groups for reservations and/or sub-quotas often have negative outcomes and domino effects. Incumbents often ignore these and only take into consideration electoral consequences. The recent decision of the Rajasthan government to fulfill the demand made by Gujjars for a 5 percent quota in government jobs could antagonize other social groups which already fall under the OBC category. The demand for a sub-quota for Muslims within the OBC quota could possibly lead to a backlash among Hindu OBCs. Fulfilling these demands becomes a populist measure rather than a tool of social justice and backward group empowerment.

The fate of caste politics in North India depends on the interplay of these three factors discussed above as each of them could have a critical impact on the voting behavior of OBCs.

## Conclusion

This paper initiates a discussion on the role of OBCs in the politics of North India and essentially provides a broad overview of their voting patterns. It leaves many unanswered questions for future research. Why is it that the Janata Dal splinter groups were unable to expand to states like Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh which also have a sizeable OBC population? Why do the Yadav Assembly consistently continue to support the SP in UP and RJD in Bihar? Is there any difference between the voting pattern of Muslim OBCs and Hindu OBCs? What is the electoral impact of accepting or ignoring demands by caste groups for quotas or sub-quotas?

The first and the second democratic upsurges in late 1960s and early 1990s were defining moments for OBC politics in the country so far (Yadav 1996, 1999). The big question for researchers is whether the 2014 Lok Sabha election could be a third defining moment for OBC politics in the country and North India specifically. It is hard to give an answer to this question at this moment, we need to wait and watch for few more elections before we begin to see an emerging pattern, distinct from the past patterns.

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# INDEX

Note: Page numbers followed by 'n' refer to notes.

- abolition of caste 78, 115, 126, 159, 163, 398  
Abstention movement 102  
addictions 68  
*Adi Granth* 32  
affirmative action, approaches 74–76, 85, 183, 199, 200, 247–250, 438, 439, 447, 449, 451–452, 459–462; Bihar model 462; Kerala and Karnataka models 460–461; Tamil Nadu model 461–462  
*Agniphule* 56  
agricultural development 50, 51  
Ahirs 161  
Aiyappan, A. 109  
Ajlaf 448–449  
Alam, Javeed 244  
All-India Backward Classes Federation (AIBCF) 235  
Ambasankar Commission 461  
Ambedkar, B.R. 1, 2, 11, 52, 79, 84, 87–99, 154, 176–178, 193, 202, 222, 228, 229, 307, 308, 311, 314, 318, 369, 371, 372, 563, 566  
Ambedkar Village Program (AVP) 441, 442  
amendments 178, 181, 221, 222, 229, 232, 310, 325, 376, 377, 390, 471, 473–475  
*Andhra Bhasha sanjeevani* 572  
*Andhra Patrika* 572  
Andhra Pradesh 290, 291, 295, 297, 298, 300–302, 465, 483, 492, 539, 543, 560, 572, 573; Adarana scheme, failure 296–297; backward classes association, formation 294–295; backward classes population, estimation 291; BC reservations 470–471; committees and commissions 465; defunct occupational cooperatives 295–296; demand for reservations, Muslims 465–467; dominant castes, backward classes 290–304; economic upliftment, policies 295; government action, commission report 298–299; insecurity of livelihoods 295–296; interim directions on 4 percent quota, Supreme Court 469–470; issues concerning reservations, SEBC Muslims 474–476; Muralidhar Rao Commission 299–300; Muslims, profile 465; occupation, genesis of backward classes identity 292–293; party politics and backward classes 301–302; percentage breakdown of total population 304; policy response 295–297; political empowerment, policies 300–301; research studies and reports 465; reservation policy, public institutions 297–298; reservations for BCs 463–465; reservations for SEBC Muslims 470; reservation to Muslim minorities 474; socially and educationally backward Muslims, reservations 468–469  
Andhra Pradesh High Court 229, 230, 298–301, 445, 457, 473; sub-quota and 457  
Anglo-Indians 138, 221, 228, 369, 400  
annihilation of caste 87–99; agenda, project, strategy 97; annihilation to democratization 88–89; argument of caste shift 90–91; Arya Samajists 95; Brahminism, subaltern castes 97; caste, argument 91–92; caste and Varna, critique of positions 93–94; context and structure 92–93; “decline of caste” argument 89–90; division of labor, caste 94–95; economic determinism 95–97; “hierarchy” to “difference” 90–91; Marxism 95–97; methodological significance, dimensions 97–98; reading strategies 87–88; Varna system 95  
anti-caste movements 5, 38, 76, 87, 89, 262, 375, 379

- anti-caste radicalism 102  
 anti-caste struggle 88, 98  
 anti-colonial nationalism 133, 402, 403  
 anti-Mandal agitation 208  
 anti-reservationists 222, 300, 315, 316, 323, 564, 570  
 artisan castes 5, 75, 80, 353, 357, 362, 365, 368, 387, 485, 487–489  
 artisan communities 296, 486, 505  
 artisan families 491, 492, 494, 495  
 artisans 260, 295, 296, 353, 483–487, 489, 491, 495, 504–506  
 Aryans 16, 43, 44, 46, 47, 115, 145, 149, 262, 360, 400  
 Aryan theory of race 39, 45  
 Arya Samaj 38, 95  
*Ashok Kumar Thakur vs Union of India* 233  
 Ashraf 448–449  
 assembly elections 333, 334, 336–339, 348, 349, 440, 442, 585, 587, 589, 590, 592  
 Ati-Shudra Dalits 40  
 Austin, G. 413n8  
 Ayyankali 311
- backward caste artisans 479–506; BC/OBC artisan castes, defining 483–484; communities, pre-divided Andhra Pradesh 492–495; consumption expenditure differentials, population groups 497–506; contours, changing 495–496; income inequality 496–497; inequity in ownership, cultivable land 496; macro perspective 486–489; micro level or general thematic studies 485–486; socio-economic status, analysis 489–492; studies 484–485  
 backward caste mobilization 293, 322, 325, 330  
 backward caste movement 5, 254, 257, 259, 261, 263, 265, 267, 269, 271, 273, 275, 321–323; Tamil Nadu 254–280  
 backward castes 154, 163, 288, 317, 321, 322, 325, 342–344, 346–351, 353, 434, 439, 480  
 backward classes 179–181, 222, 223, 229, 231, 281, 282, 291, 295, 297–299, 301, 302, 373, 434, 435, 462  
 backward classes commission 189–191, 225, 228, 230, 233, 236, 270, 272, 278, 283, 288, 289, 330, 373, 449, 483  
 backward classes committees 285–287; Dr R. Nagana Gowda Committee 285–287; Miller Committee 285  
 backward classes discourse 142, 144, 389, 406; academic readings 392–394; caste, society and category-wise rights 399–402; caste social order, naturalization 395–396; constitutional commissions 391–392; constitutional provisions 389–391; contextualization, implications 410–413; contextualizing 389–414; degradation and deprivation 397–399; historically achieved rights and 403–406; liberal façade, illiberal foundations 406–410; non-contextualization, implications 394  
 backward class movements 3–5, 154, 173, 228, 254, 281, 326, 339, 559; Karnataka 281–289  
 backward communities 178, 197, 200, 209, 210, 222, 271, 285–287, 373, 375, 387, 447, 449  
 backward god 11–18  
 backward groups 234, 265, 281, 283, 449, 468  
 Backward Hindus 113, 221, 228, 268, 269  
 backwardization 121, 133, 411  
 backward mobilization 322–324, 326, 328, 330–332  
 backward movement 192, 322, 323, 332  
 backward Muslims 165, 458, 460, 464, 466, 468, 469, 474, 475  
 backwardness 17, 121, 125, 142, 143, 150, 179, 191, 194, 196, 201, 207, 221, 223, 229, 391, 406, 412, 482, 513  
 backward politics 331, 332  
 backward tribes 283, 287, 409  
*Bahujana Keratalu* 574  
 Bahujan movements 306, 307  
 Bahujans 63, 67, 68, 309, 310, 313–318  
 Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) 240, 323, 326, 328, 329, 334, 440–442, 586, 589, 590, 592  
 Baishya Kapalis 377  
 Bajpai, R. 393, 413nn7, 8  
 Baker, C.J. 151n8  
 Balagopal, K. 198  
 BAMCEF 326  
 Bengal: British colonial policy and caste 366; case study, caste 358–359; caste, impact of Islam 362; caste society in 360–361; empowerment of backward classes 373–374; leaders and story of empowerment 365–366; leaders of 20th century, Jyotirao Phule 371–373; Muslims in 367–370; nineteenth century Bengali intellectuals and caste 364–365; politics of depressed classes 370–371; position of left government 375–377; precolonial scenario, historiography 359–360; protest movements, caste equality 362–364; retrograde opposition 374–375; sample briefs, OBC groups 377; Shudras in 361–362  
 Besant, Annie 267  
 Beteille, Andre 89, 101, 266, 393, 485  
*Bhaktamal* 25  
 Bhakti movement 19–26, 35, 36, 362  
*Bhaktirasbodhini* 25  
 Bhambhani, C.P. 244  
 Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) 216, 237, 317, 326, 327, 329, 332, 338, 339, 351, 442, 460, 475, 585–587, 589, 591–593  
*bhatjis* 49  
 Bihar 185, 186, 188, 236, 328, 342–344, 347, 349, 351–353, 377, 428, 448, 451, 462, 592, 593; assembly election and Laloo phenomenon

- 348–351; backward caste movement, origin 342–344; backward castes and post-Laloo Bihar 352–353; Bihar Assembly election, 1967 347; caste and reservation politics 347–348; movement to participation, democratic politics 344; rural bourgeoisie, backward castes 344–347; upper backward castes, competing 351–352
- Bole, S.K. 77
- Brahmanic backlash 33–35
- Brahmanic liberalism 25
- Brahmans 24, 25, 29, 34, 40, 43, 49, 73–76, 80, 82–84, 196, 267, 351
- Brahminism 9, 91–98, 305–308, 313, 361; subaltern castes 97
- Brahmins 12, 58, 61, 62, 66, 124, 127, 134, 138, 145, 256–258, 260–262, 265, 269, 314, 343; in administrative structures 256–261; in educational institutions 256–261
- British under Company 254; educational policy and 255–256
- Buddha, Gautama 3, 11–18, 30, 34, 176, 307, 309, 311, 313
- Burman, B.K. 212n21
- Burman, Roy 244
- business strategies 67
- case studies: OBC communities women, profiles 533–535
- caste: annihilation 85–89, 91–98; associations 173, 278, 284, 289, 293–294, 342, 343, 346, 353, 525; and class 356–358; contesting 19–36; definition of 355–356; discrimination 60, 90, 96, 311, 317, 318, 369, 378, 521, 567, 575; division 12, 73, 95, 480; dominance 4, 91, 97, 98; hierarchy 84, 85, 97, 101, 102, 203, 261, 262, 309, 358, 359, 364, 365, 447, 480; Hindus 47, 58, 372, 373, 378, 403, 420; historicizing 102–104; identities 241, 244, 281, 322, 346, 366, 420, 425, 532, 555, 567; inequalities 1, 165, 363, 365, 375; movement 323, 326, 342, 371, 375; names 9, 210, 263, 271, 422, 481, 487, 552, 553, 558, 560; occupations 196, 513–516, 518, 522, 525, 529, 532, 556–558; politics 328, 339, 594; silences in history 358; system 1, 14, 44, 75, 76, 80, 81, 84–86, 92, 98, 160, 163, 176, 195, 358, 362, 433, 479; *see also individual entries*
- caste-based reservations 200, 208, 216, 238, 355, 358, 374
- caste certificate 540, 551, 555, 559
- caste-conditioned consciousness 250–251
- caste differences 76, 81, 105, 108, 379
- casteism 65, 193, 221, 223, 234, 238, 241, 244, 245, 250, 251
- casteless society 4, 9, 12, 98
- caste-religion 136, 139, 401–404, 412
- caste-ridden society 63, 113, 122, 147, 393, 575
- caste society 105, 112–151, 357, 360, 364, 393
- caste-society and category-wise rights 113, 115, 117, 119, 121, 123, 125, 127, 129, 131, 133, 135, 137, 139, 141
- The Caste System* 156
- category-wise representation 129, 134, 136, 138, 141, 145, 149
- category-wise rights 112–151, 402, 403; backward classes discourse 399–402; demand, discursive context 122–125; democratic distribution 129–131; nationalism and unity 132–136; perspectives 128–129; political biography 125–128; proportional representation, Brahmins 131; *vs.* reservation for backward classes 146–147; self-respect and 147–149
- category-wise scheme 130, 404–406
- Central Educational Institutions Reservation in Admissions Act, 2006 232
- Chaitanyaadeb 362
- Chakravarty, Uma 209
- Chamars 161
- Chandalas* 175
- Chatterjee, P. 101
- Chaturvarnya* 1
- children 226, 490, 509, 510, 519, 522, 523, 525, 526, 531–534, 540–543, 555, 556, 558
- Chomsky, N. 20
- Christians 102, 196, 197, 202, 265–267, 446, 449, 453, 455, 460, 461, 476, 568
- civil services 260, 261, 264, 368
- class–caste debate: myth of 200–201
- classes 103, 134, 179, 180, 200, 201, 231, 233, 238, 255, 256, 259, 265, 270, 282, 356, 368, 390, 435, 483
- colonial state 256, 258, 277, 364, 370, 399, 401, 403, 404
- communalism 136–141
- communal representation 79, 125, 127, 249, 250, 260, 267, 367, 368, 400
- community leaders 513–516, 521, 522, 528, 531, 532, 547–549, 552, 554, 557
- community-wise arguments 136–141
- Competing Equalities: Law and the Backward Classes in India* 192
- constituent assembly debate 221–222
- Constitution (73rd Amendment) Act 181
- Constitution (74th Amendment) Act 181
- Constitutional Assembly 112, 404, 406–408
- Constitution of India 1, 2, 113, 180, 182, 225, 275, 276, 282, 480, 481
- contemporary lifestyles 16–17
- contextualist reading 87
- cooperative societies 227, 294, 296, 368, 374, 490
- criminal tribes 4; *see also de-notified tribes*
- Criminal Tribes Act 538
- Crown rule 254; educational policy and 255–256
- culture 15, 17, 20, 38–40, 45, 118, 395–398, 400, 401, 574

## Index

- Dahyabhai, D. 419  
Dalit journalists 564–566  
Dalit movement 91  
Dalit Muslims 202, 352, 459, 548  
Dalits 17, 101, 154, 176–177, 206, 308, 309, 312, 322, 326, 328, 352, 378, 441, 442, 563, 566, 567, 576  
Dalrymple, William 206  
Das, Arvind Narayan 209  
Dayal, Dadu 31  
debts 68  
deification 109–111  
de-notified tribes (DNTs) 4; educated voices 559–560  
depressed classes 79, 129, 130, 149, 177, 203, 221, 222, 261, 267, 268, 281, 282, 369, 370, 407, 481  
*Desabhimani* 572  
Desai, A.R. 485  
Desai, I.P. 201  
Desai, Morarji 179, 190  
Deshmukh, Punjabrao 2  
Deshpande, G.P. 55  
Deshpande, K.P. 56  
Deshpande, Satish 205  
De Swart 413n9  
Dharmadas 31  
Dharwadker, V. 21  
Dirks, Nicholas 151n8, 357, 358, 382n9  
*Discovery of India* 98n1  
discrimination 1, 62, 133, 147, 148, 197, 309, 311, 312, 398, 433, 512, 558, 571, 576, 584  
Dobois, Abbe 254  
dominant castes 246, 247, 251, 252, 284, 290, 291, 295, 301, 302, 480, 483; Andhra Pradesh 290–304  
Dommara community 556–559; neglect of community, government 557–558; stigma of sex work 556–557; women of 558–559  
Dravida Maha Jana Sabha 123  
Dushkin, L. 393  
Dwarkanath Commission 289  
Dwijas 161, 162  
  
economically weaker sections (EWS): ten percent reservations for 460  
economic liberalism 181  
education 40, 44, 58–60, 65, 67, 76, 78, 143, 144, 242, 255, 256, 259, 277, 286, 515, 518, 526, 529  
educational backwardness 179–181, 225–226, 229, 230, 272, 273, 276, 463, 464, 470, 471  
educational institutions 218, 232, 251, 252, 254, 275, 276, 299, 300, 347, 389, 428, 440, 454, 471  
educational levels 297, 447, 452, 453, 551  
educationally backward classes 221, 243, 463, 465, 468  
educational status 202, 367, 446, 447, 453, 458  
Elphinstone, M. 255  
  
employment 74, 118, 119, 122, 143, 144, 147, 194, 224, 256, 366, 396, 401, 405, 429, 436, 459, 482, 488  
empowerment 101–103, 147–149, 168, 169, 309, 325, 328, 351, 352, 399, 423; of women 6  
“End Caste Conference” 163; adopt caste-neutral titles (surnames) 163; inter-caste marriage 163; mixed dinner 163; oppressed, special opportunities 164  
Engels, Friedrich 59  
English-language media 565, 568, 575, 576, 583  
entrenched inequality 509–535  
equality 43, 44, 51, 63, 64, 91, 135, 164, 165, 169, 192, 289, 393, 407, 409, 510; of opportunity 178, 192, 198, 199, 221, 247, 374, 389, 436  
excluded communities 4, 6, 54, 511, 532  
excluded Muslim groups 473  
exploited castes 73–76, 81, 480  
Ezhabas 100, 102, 108  
  
Fakirs, Mahbubnagar district: give up begging 548; precarious financial position 548–549; social status 549; women and girl children 549–550  
Fakir Struggle Committee 548  
*The Farmer’s Whipcord* 310  
fight caste 163, 251; domination 379  
First Backward Classes Commission 179, 191, 196–197, 222–225, 236, 287, 298, 373, 435, 447, 449, 482; in Karnataka 287; recommendations, political/official response 233–236; *see also* Kaka Kalekar Commission  
first Telangana State Commission 471  
*A Forgotten Liberator: The Life and Struggle of Savitribai Phule* 56  
formal equality 149, 407, 409, 410  
forward castes 216, 218, 241, 318, 376, 434  
freedom 2, 3, 81–83, 106, 107, 132, 135, 136, 168, 178, 405, 407, 495  
free education 516, 559, 560  
Freire, Paulo 58  
Fundamental Rights 113, 116, 150, 221, 228, 389, 407  
  
Galanter, M. 392, 413n8, 485  
Gandhi, Mahatma 88, 93, 94, 103–104, 106, 108, 126–127, 168, 177, 189, 190, 369, 408  
gender 63, 65, 153–155, 163–166, 168, 170, 316, 527, 529, 530  
gender equality 509–510; in India 510  
gender inequalities 9, 153, 168, 170, 363, 509; global overview 509–510  
general educational backwardness 286  
general Muslim population 451  
Ghurye, G.S. 355, 356  
gift of knowledge 67–68  
Global Gender Gap Report 511, 536  
globalization 3, 181, 245, 252, 296, 305, 319, 379, 574  
Gorakhnathi Yogis 27

- Goud community 292, 513–514, 527–532; alcoholism 530–531; dowry and marriage, daughters 529; feticide 529–530; jobs for sons 529; position of women 528; profile of 527–528; school education for daughters 529; son preference 530; voices of women, Kothapet 529; women's status 530
- government employment 119, 124, 147, 148, 445, 452, 454, 459, 463, 512, 518, 519
- government jobs 108, 119, 122, 124, 143, 147, 346, 347, 373, 374, 377, 575, 576
- Government of Gujarat 425, 429
- Government of Karnataka 287–289, 376
- Government of Maharashtra 12, 81, 85, 307
- Government of Mysore 261, 282, 285, 433
- Government of Tamil Nadu 270, 271, 275, 276
- Government of Telangana 471, 472, 513
- government schools 256, 367, 515, 519, 525, 531, 532, 540, 558
- government services 193, 204, 223, 224, 226, 265, 266, 269–271, 275, 277, 284, 286, 288
- Gramsci, A. 98
- group rights 115, 124, 125, 142, 146, 149, 405, 409
- Gujarat 375, 417–429, 450; backdrop, OBCs illustration and status 418–419; context of 419–420; economic and entrepreneurial development 424–425; educational development and OBCs 427–429; inclusion, exclusion and empowerment, OBCs 423–424; land, context of 423–424; other empowering policies 429; post-independence scenario 421–423; pre-independence Gujarat 420; social and political mobilization, OBCs 420; social sector funding 425; state of affairs and healthcare 426–427
- Gulamgiri* 43, 55, 56
- Gulamgiri, Das Shudranchi 320n7
- Gupta, D. 485
- Guru, Narayana 100–111; Advaita and caste 104–105; antinomies of Hinduism 104–105; caste, historicizing 102–104; castes and species 105–107; humanity, naturalization 105–107; reform, limits of 107–109
- Guru, Nataraja 104
- Hall, S. 20
- Harad, T. 567
- Harappan (Indus Valley) civilization 16, 17
- Hardgrave, Robert 266
- Hartog Committee 282
- Havanur Commission 452, 461
- Hess, L. 28
- hierarchy 65, 66, 75, 90–92, 356, 358, 362–364, 417, 418, 479, 556
- higher castes 12, 101, 103, 108, 168, 170, 227, 363, 366, 442, 448
- Hindu caste system 12, 14, 175, 178, 355, 448
- Hinduism 16, 27–29, 93–95, 102, 104, 176, 197, 311, 405, 406, 549
- Hinduism: Past and Present* 175
- Hindu nationalism 47
- Hindus 43, 45, 95, 176, 197, 202, 246, 342, 359, 360, 367, 369, 448–450, 453, 455, 459, 549, 569
- Hitabodhini* 572
- Home Rule Movement 267
- Hukum Singh Committee 331
- Human Development Report 511, 513
- Hyderabad Backward Castes Association 294
- Hyderabad State 290, 294, 297, 558, 572
- identity, OBC 202–203, 206–210
- identity-centric political mobilization 293
- ideologies 2, 4–5, 9, 20, 38, 39, 45, 55, 73, 210, 215, 305, 310, 363, 572
- independent India 1, 2, 83, 158, 186, 299, 405, 406, 412, 421, 481
- Indian Christians 138, 228, 255, 260, 267, 366, 369, 460
- Indian Constitution 1, 112, 113, 192, 194, 201, 203, 235, 236, 440, 445
- Indian media 243, 388, 562, 564–566, 568, 571, 580, 583
- Indian National Congress 38, 70, 112, 125, 137, 139, 185, 369, 392, 404, 438
- Indian politics 189, 200, 339, 590
- Indian population 204, 208, 374, 439, 569
- Indian renaissance 38–40
- Indian society 1, 55, 56, 84, 95, 96, 153–155, 159, 160, 164, 165, 205, 360
- Indian women 4, 57, 166, 169, 176, 511
- India's population 156, 281, 435, 567, 568
- India's Unequal Citizens* 215, 225
- Indo-Aryans 1
- Indra Sawhney case: Supreme Court observations 455–456
- industrialization 49, 50
- inequalities 1, 2, 154, 155, 164–167, 169, 170, 192, 199, 200, 249, 509
- inter-caste marriages 76, 78, 79, 163, 176, 201, 209, 379, 521, 532, 546
- Irani Arya-bhats 45
- Jaffrelot, C. 393, 413nn7, 8, 593
- Jajimani system 293
- Jatibhed Viveksar* 41
- Jātis 358
- Jeevan Reddy, B.P. 179
- Jeffrey, Robin 563, 564, 566
- Jenkins, L.D. 393
- Joshi, Ram Sharhan 205
- Jugis 27
- Kabir, Sant 25–30
- Kabir Parachai* 25

- Kaka Kalelkar Commission 222–225, 270, 282, 391, 447, 449  
 Kalelkar, K. 482  
 Kamaraj, K. 114  
 Karmakars 377  
 Karnataka 173, 281, 283–289, 375, 376, 452, 460, 461, 563; backward classes committees 285–287; non-Brahmin movement 284–285; social profile 283–284  
 Karpoori formula 462  
*Kavyaphuley* 65  
*K. C. Vasantha Kumar vs State of Karnataka* 230  
 Keer, Dhananjay 61  
 Kerala 100–103, 105, 107, 109–111, 375, 376, 452, 460–462  
 khadi 64  
 KHAM 421  
 knowledge 28, 29, 35, 60, 65–67, 80, 104–106, 120, 121, 198, 255  
 Kolhapur State 74–76, 83, 85, 308, 463  
 Kosambi, D.D. 355  
*Krantijyoti Savitribai Phule* 56  
 Kshatriyas 1, 46  
*Kula Nirmulana* 574  
 Kumar, S. 594  
 Kummaras 17n1  
 Kundu Committee (post-Sachar evaluation committee) report 458–459; on reservations and affirmative action 459–460  
 Kurmis 323–325, 329, 330, 337, 338, 343, 344, 347, 349, 351, 352, 592, 593  
 Kuruma community 513–514, 525–527; “advantages” of having son 527; alcoholism impact, women 526; education for improving life 526–527; feticide 527; sex selection 526; voices of community leaders 525–526; voices of women 526  
 language 20, 22, 23, 42, 43, 45, 57, 60, 201, 203, 262, 314, 397, 547, 549  
 Latthe, A.B. 79  
 liberal democracy 149–150, 406, 407  
 liberalization, privatization and globalization (LPG) 252  
 list of backward classes 180, 182, 229, 259, 261, 263–265, 277, 295, 297–299, 461, 464  
 Lohia, Ram Manohar 153–170, 188, 211n10, 322; anti-change force, caste 157–160; on caste 155–157; caste system, destruction 160; congealing of money and status, caste 160–164; customs and traditions, revolt 167–169; early days of 154–155; empowering people and 153–170; equality for women and 164–166; financial independence and preferential opportunities 169–170; free women and free nation 170; movements and politics, women’s participation 166–167; peaceful revolution 157; socialist thought and 153–170; women’s status, moral wellbeing of nation 166  
 Lok Sabha 186–189, 193, 237, 240, 241, 329, 330, 333, 589, 590  
 Lok Sabha Elections 272, 330, 338, 585–587, 589, 590, 592–594  
 lower backward castes 344, 347  
 lower castes 97, 98, 103, 104, 107, 109, 157, 158, 160–162, 169, 207, 307, 342, 349, 365, 369, 370, 439  
 lower OBCs 339, 340, 424, 587, 590, 592, 593  
 Ludden, D. 151n8  
 Madras 113–116, 228, 229, 255–257, 260, 261, 264, 265, 277, 368  
 Madras government 109, 113, 115, 116, 256, 257, 261, 263–265, 270  
 Maharashtra 47; Bahujan legacy, reclaiming 305–320; Dalit movement, insurgency 312; Hindu Rashtra *vs.* Bahujan Rashtra 317–318; Hindutva fanaticism and challenges 317; ideology of Satyashodak 305–308; legacy of idols 305–308; Marathas and Muslims, demand for reservations 463; non-Brahmin and Phule-Ambedkarite movements 305–308; OBC movement and different streams 313–316; OBC movement in 305–320; OBC reservations in 462–463; Phule-Ambedkarite and subaltern perspectives 309; Shudra-Atishudra, Bahujan as idiom 309–311; social movements, emergence 312–313  
 Mahar-Mang-Ramoshi-Dhed 78  
 Mahars 62  
 Maine, Sir Henry 175  
 mainstream society 352, 538, 539, 544, 553  
 majority community 453, 454, 469, 476  
 Mali, M.G. 56  
 Mandal, Bindhyeshwari Prasad 179; Madhepura, socialist laboratory 186–187; political career 190; profile 184–185; self-respect, legacy 185–186; subaltern concerns and *Shoshit Dal* 187–190; and Supreme Court judgment 230–233  
 Mandal, Jagendranath 371–373  
 Mandal Commission 179, 182, 190–196, 201, 202, 225, 226, 244, 275, 311, 374, 435, 447, 449–450, 456, 472; Bahujan Samaj Party and reservation 240–241; castes separation, special treatment 275–277; communist argument 238–239; fear of misusing reservation 200; intelligentsia, media and civil society 241–247; manifesto of social inclusion 201–202; myths about 195–196; OBC leaders’ efforts to counter anti-reservation forces 240; recommendations of 226–228; socialist and Lohiaite argument 239; V.P. Singh’s argument 239–241  
 Mandal Commission report 181, 182, 194–197, 207, 208, 215, 221, 222, 226–230, 239; OBC movement, India 2

- Mandal ideology 204  
Mandal movement 3  
Mandal Report 193–195, 199–202, 204, 208, 210, 306, 310, 315  
Mandula community, Ibrahimpatnam 542–547; caste panchayat 544–545; political marginalization 546; social customs 544; social problems 546–547; traditional occupation and 543–544  
Mangs 62  
Marathas 161  
Maravars 271  
marriage 57, 76, 90, 107, 167, 168, 292, 438, 455, 524, 525, 527, 528, 532, 546, 552, 555  
Marx, Karl 59, 162  
media 315, 388, 562–584; accredited journalists 579–580; big media houses ownership, “upper” castes 569–570; caste discrimination 575; conservative stronghold 563–564; Dalit journalists 568–569; discrimination, news coverage 571; exclusion 565–566; Indian citizens, invisible 564–565; largest consumer of newspapers, India 562–563; marginalized people, biased coverage 570–571; newspapers, magazines and digital platforms 566–568; organizations 564–567, 570, 583; Press Academy, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana 580; social and caste composition, newsrooms 566–568; and social exclusion 570; social movements 575–576; Telugu press 571–574; upper caste, majoritarian and male-dominated 568; vulnerable people life stories ignored 574–575  
*Menace of Hindu Imperialism* 151n5  
mental frameworks 20  
meritocracy 196, 198, 241, 243, 244; *vs.* equality of opportunity 198–200; myths 196–198  
middle castes 46, 47, 192, 193, 322, 327, 331, 418, 425, 448  
Miller Committee 285  
minorities 142, 407, 409, 412, 445–447, 453–459, 464, 465, 472, 476, 496, 502; communities 248, 249, 446, 454, 456, 476; empowerment of 445–446; sub-quota for 445, 456  
Mira Bai 33  
Misra, Loknath 221  
Mitchel, J. Murray 175  
mobilization 209, 210, 290, 291, 323, 325–328, 330, 401, 403, 420, 421, 423  
Most Backward Classes (MBCs) 246, 270, 272, 275, 276, 283, 347, 353, 450–451, 461, 462, 482  
*M. R. Balaji vs State of Mysore* 229  
Muslim League 260, 369, 371, 404  
Muslim OBCs 444, 445, 447, 449–453, 455, 457, 459, 461, 463, 475, 476  
Muslims 242, 256, 317, 349, 367, 445–453, 458, 459, 461–468, 470–473, 475, 492, 538, 548; affirmative action, approaches 449, 452, 460–462; education 446; employment 447; 494 castes/subcastes, central list 445; four major social groups 448–449; OBCs, profile 447–448; OBCs are most backward 451; OBCs not in state and central list 450–451; population 242, 387, 448, 452, 460, 462, 465; Ranganath Misra Commissions 447; Sachar Committee 447, 452; socio-economic conditions of 446–447; studies on reservations 476; work participation rate (WPR) 446–447  
Nabhadas 25  
Nadar Mahajana Sangam 263, 264  
Nadars 254, 255; aspirations and assertions 261–266  
Nagana Gowda Committee 285–287  
Nambutiri Yogakshema Sabha 103  
Nanak, Guru 31–32  
Nath-Yogis 27  
National Commission 202, 445, 447, 456  
National Commission for Backward Classes (NCBC) 326  
The National Council for Applied and Economic Research 502  
nationalism 39, 42, 124, 132–140, 393, 394, 410–412  
nationalist movement 5, 87, 92, 103, 114, 293, 308, 403, 408  
national parties 585, 586, 589, 590, 593  
National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO) survey 435  
nation state 45, 83, 143, 149, 408, 412  
Nayi Brahmin community 513–521, 531, 539, 556; caste discrimination 521; education for boys and girls 519; feticide 520; marriage and dowry, daughters 520; men’s and caste occupation 518; Metrajpalli village, Dichpally mandal 517–521; precarious existence, women 517; preference for sons 519–520; profile of 514; voices of community leaders 514–516; voices of women 516–517; women and education 518–519  
neglect, OBCs 1–2  
Nehru, Jawaharlal 98n1, 153, 190, 221  
New Delhi 195, 243, 316, 438, 569, 590  
New Economic Policy 249  
Nirguna 20  
Nizamabad, Telangana: area of study 512–513; four castes, profile 513–514; Goud community 513–514, 527–532; Kuruma community 513–514, 525–527; Nayi Brahmin community 513–521; OBC women in 509–535; Rajaka community 513–514, 521–525; status of women, OBCs 511–512; women’s status, statistics 511  
nomadic tribes/communities 4, 537–539, 544–547, 549–554, 558–560; outside mainstream society 553; Surabhi artistes, doldrums 550–551; Veerabhadriya or Veeramushti community

- 551–553; voices of youth 551; welfare sangam, reforms in social life 553–554
- non-Aryan theory 46
- non-Brahman movement 38, 47, 48, 51, 52, 70
- non-Brahmin castes 109, 258, 262, 266, 277, 419; Justice Party's role 266–275
- non-Brahmin movement 102, 254, 257, 266, 267, 269, 284, 306, 309, 310, 313
- North India: monolithic block, OBC vote 590–593; national picture, OBC vote 585–587; OBC politics, fate 593–594; OBC vote in 585–594; state-wise pattern, OBC vote 587–590
- OBC empowerment, Maharashtra 70–86
- O'Brien, Barbara 13
- occupational groups 227, 231, 291, 293, 295, 296, 483, 488, 489, 494, 503
- occupations 2, 3, 31, 223, 229, 230, 283, 284, 292, 489–491, 493, 495, 502
- Omvedt, Gail 209, 320n7
- Oommen, T.K. 203
- othering process 100
- outcastes 176, 363, 539, 547
- Paine, Thomas 40
- Pali Tipitika* 14
- Pant, G.B. 233, 438
- participatory parity 147, 151n14, 399
- particular caste 34, 64, 176, 186, 220, 258, 423, 434
- Pasmanda Movement 210
- Patel, P.M. 420, 422
- Patil, S. 201, 320n7
- peasants 5, 39, 41, 42, 45, 48–50, 68, 71, 203, 313, 325–327, 353, 480, 483, 569
- Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 58
- Phule, Jotirao 58, 59, 176; Aryans 44–47; economic and political dilemmas 48–51; and Indian renaissance 38–40; non-Aryans 44–47; Satyashodhak Samaj 41–43; thought and ideology 38–53; writings 43–44
- Phule, Savitribai 5, 9, 54–57, 59, 61–63, 69, 313, 314; Barber's strike 64–65; early life and education 57–59; genres and giving social messages 65–68; impactful legacy and powerful Dalit-Bahujan icon 69; khadi and women's help group 64; opening of schools 59–63; reclaiming 54–69; revolutionary beginnings 59–63; Satyashodhak and 63–64; women and Shudra-Ati-Shudra 59–63; writings 65–68
- policies development 5
- political class 159, 205, 237, 244, 541
- political parties 157–159, 165–167, 182, 215, 216, 236, 264, 291, 325, 470, 539
- political society 100–111
- politics 36, 89, 91, 101, 102, 110, 125, 166, 194, 244, 332, 387, 394, 572, 573
- Poona Sarvajanik Sabha 38
- post-Mandal scenario 210
- post-Sachar Evaluation Committee 473
- poverty 4, 5, 48, 67, 165, 166, 272, 273, 283, 297, 298, 429, 436, 495, 503
- power structure 11, 239, 351, 352, 364
- P. Rajendran vs State of Madras* 229
- Prarthana Samaj 38
- pre- and post-Mandal India 215–252
- pre-Mandal India: reservations and political/government response 222–225
- privileged castes 3, 5, 6, 83, 306, 318, 563, 580
- Priyadas 25
- Prof. Ravivarma Kumar Commission 288–289
- P. Sagar vs State of A. P.* 229
- Purushardha Pradhayini* 572
- quantum of reservations 226, 229, 275, 276, 460, 461, 469, 472, 474–476
- Radhakrishnan, K.S. 105, 106
- Radhakrishnan, P. 106, 393
- Radhakrishnan, S. 95
- radical social reformer 78–80
- Raja, Kumaraswami 114
- Rajaka community 513–514, 521–525; alcoholism in community 523; caste profession and respect 523; government schools and 525; hospitals 523; long days and strenuous work 524; profile of 521–522; uncertainty and insecurity, wages/work 524; voices of community leaders 522; voices of women 522; women and oppression 524
- Ram, Chandrika 222
- Ramasami Periyar, E.V. 177, 249; caste-society and 112–151; category-wise rights and 125–149; “clerk” and “clerical,” rise and consolidation 119–120; communalism 136–141; community-wise arguments 136–141; consolidation and structuration, Brahminical casteism 117–119; intervenes 112–116; liberal democracy and 149–150; nationalism and unity 132–136; political biography 125–128; productive classes into Shudras and backward classes 141–146; proportional representation, Brahmins 131; specific Tamil social configuration 120–122
- Ranade, M.G. 176
- Ranganath Misra Commissions 447, 472
- Rao, Katti Padma 574
- Rashtriya Swayam Sevak (RSS) 216
- Ravidas 30–31
- reading strategies 87–88
- rebellion, against caste and Brahmanism 21–24
- Reddi Naidu, K.V. 266
- reform movements 3–4
- Rege, S. 320
- religiosity 21, 23, 35, 36
- religious communities 31, 126, 129, 130, 132, 445, 446, 465

## Index

- religious minorities 123, 129, 142, 405, 445, 447, 449, 452–454, 460; recommendations relating to 453–455; socio-economic status 452–453
- Renke Commission 536
- reservations, OBCs; judiciary on criteria 228–230; policy 182, 297, 300, 308, 378, 387, 421, 438, 442, 460, 463; rules 232, 272, 273, 275, 278
- Revankar, R.G. 393
- Rights of Man* 40
- Right to Education Act 181
- The Rise of the Low Castes in North Indian Politics* 192
- Roy, A. 88
- Roy, Raja Ram Mohan 176
- Rudolph, L.I. 322, 485
- Rudolph, S.H. 485
- Ruhelkhand 338
- Sachar Committee 447, 448, 451, 452, 458
- Saguna bhakti 20
- Saheb, Darya 31
- Saheb, Yari 31
- Samantara* 574
- Samyukta Socialist Party (SSP) 188
- Sangha rules 12
- Sanghvi 422
- Sankaralinga Nadar vs Raja Rajeswara Dori* 263
- Sarvajanik Satyadharma* 43, 48
- Sarvanajanik Satya dharma* 43
- Sasirekha 572
- Sattanathan Commission 270, 272, 461
- Satya Samvardhini* 572
- Satyashodhak Samaj 30, 38, 41–43, 55, 63; early days 63–64
- Scheduled Castes (SCs) 1, 2, 115, 177–180, 202–203, 207, 216, 218, 221, 222, 226, 227, 232, 271–273, 276, 281, 282, 288, 321, 322, 370, 371, 373–375, 389, 390, 393, 404, 435, 436, 444, 454, 455, 461
- Scheduled Tribes (STs) 2, 177–181, 202–203, 207, 216, 218, 226, 227, 232, 272, 273, 276, 281–282, 288, 321–322, 347, 373–375, 389, 423, 424, 435, 436, 444, 454, 455, 461, 462, 471, 472, 474, 475, 496, 580
- SEBC Muslims 468–470, 474, 475
- Second All-India Backward Classes Commission 435
- Second Backward Classes Commission 190, 191, 225, 236, 287, 441, 447, 456, 464, 472, 482; Congress and BJP 236–238; economic 482–483; education 482; in Karnataka 287; political/government response 236–238; social 482; *see also* Mandal Commission
- Second Backward Classes Commission Report 191, 192, 195, 198, 200–202, 204
- sectors, OBCs employed: Central government 216–219; reservations, pre-independence period 219–221
- Self-Respect Movement 268, 278
- semi-nomadic communities 246, 283, 289, 536, 548, 556
- Sen, Amartya 181
- Sen, K.M. 27
- service castes 5, 271, 353, 479, 480, 503, 505, 559
- sex work 517, 556–558, 560
- Shahu Maharaj (Rajarshi Shahu) 70–86, 311; affirmative action 74–76; agro-industrial development, modern perspective 80–81; attitude, working class 77–78; castes, Maharashtra 71–74; contradictions and effects 84–86; progressive ideology 82–84; radical social reformer 78–80; socio-economic situation 70–71; Vedokta affair and Tilak's Brahmanism 82–84
- Sharp, Sir Henry 281
- Sheth, D.L. 89
- Shetjis* 49
- Shetkaryacha Asud* 56
- Shodhan, A. 419
- Shudra-Ati-Shudra 43, 55–59, 68, 307, 309, 313, 319
- Shudras 1, 11–18, 34, 65–67, 83, 119, 142, 143, 148, 160, 161, 176, 189, 197, 203, 362, 396
- Shudras (menials) 1
- silent revolution 204–206
- Singh, Charan 333
- Singh, V.P. 199
- Singh, Yogendra 244
- SNDP movement 105, 107–109
- social backwardness 179–180, 196, 223, 225–226, 229–231, 235, 238, 459, 479, 482
- social groups 130, 149, 367, 368, 435, 436, 447, 448, 450, 486, 492, 496, 497, 593, 594
- social justice 173, 175–183, 192, 196, 208, 239, 348, 351, 352, 594
- socially and educationally backward classes (SEBCs) 180, 468–469
- social profile 283–284
- social revolution, heritage of 51–53
- social thought 4–5
- social transformation 39
- socio-economic situation 70–71
- South India 16, 46, 161, 342, 357
- special economic zones (SEZs) 182
- Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP) 100
- Sree Narayana movement 101, 102
- Sri Krishna Committee Report 492
- Srinivas, M.N. 244, 485
- Sriramulu, Palnati 574
- state assembly elections 327, 349, 442
- state governments 226, 227, 232, 233, 282, 286, 287, 297–300, 425, 463, 475, 504
- state of Andhra Pradesh 181, 290, 297, 470, 471, 492, 503, 573

## Index

- State of A. P. vs S. V. Balaram* 230  
State of Madras 113, 114, 228, 229, 294, 483  
*State of Madras vs Smt. Champakam Dorairajan* 228  
state of Mysore 116, 179, 203, 282, 284, 393, 460  
state policies 305, 389, 418, 433–435, 437, 439, 441, 444, 486  
state population 331, 462, 463  
state power 124, 239, 245, 252, 291, 357  
states of Travancore 100, 101, 109, 311, 460  
Stokes, Eric 360  
Stri-Shudra-Ati-Shudra 58  
subaltern castes 40, 97, 98, 250, 348, 351, 358  
subcastes 311, 312, 359, 360, 363, 364, 471, 472, 479, 480, 513, 514, 556, 557, 590  
sub-quota 179, 445, 454, 456–458, 461, 472, 473, 476, 594  
*Sujanaranjani* 572  
Supreme Court 113, 181, 228–230, 272, 275, 276, 287, 298, 299, 457, 458, 460, 461, 467, 469, 470, 474, 475; Indra Sawhney case 455–456; refused stay on HC order, sub-quota 457–458  
*Sutta-pitika* 14  
Swarup, Damodar 221
- Tagore, R. 364, 365  
Tamil Nadu 46–47, 112–114, 116, 149, 173, 254, 262, 274–276, 307, 461; backward caste movement 254–280; educational institutions and administrative structures, Brahmins 256–261; educational policy 255–256; Justice Party's role 266–275; Nadars and Vanniyars 261–266; separation of castes 275–277  
Tamil Nadu Backward Classes Commission 270  
*Tatvabodhini* 572  
Telangana 290, 471, 473, 475, 492, 496, 497, 502, 512–513, 521, 538, 539, 543, 547, 551, 559, 573–574, 580; BC reservations 470–471; children not allowed into schools 542; DNTs in 538–539; Dommara community 556–559; educated voices, DNTs 559–560; Fakirs, Mahbubnagar district 547–550; humiliation and abuse 540–542; Mandula community, Ibrahimpatnam 542–547; Mondi community, Pochampally town 539–540; nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes 536–538; nomadic communities, Mahbubnagar district 550–554; post-bifurcation, share of backward classes 471–472; SEBC Muslim and ST quota 472; Veerabhadriya women 554–556  
Telangana Samagra Kutumba Survey 492  
Teli 377  
Telugu media: electronic news media 577; monopoly of upper castes 576–577; newspapers, SCs, STs and OBCs representation 577–579; print media 576–577  
Telugu press 571–574; beginnings and growth 571–572; in modern times 572–574  
textualist reading 87
- Thatte, Vishnupant 61  
third backward classes Commission: in Karnataka 287–288  
traditional caste occupations 283, 307, 491, 517, 521, 522, 574  
traditional occupations 283, 284, 292, 296, 297, 356, 487, 490, 491, 495, 503, 543, 556–558  
Turner, B.S. 20
- Universal adult franchise 181  
University Grants Commission (UGC) 56  
Uniyal, B.N. 566  
untouchability 65, 78, 81, 89, 90, 100–102, 104–106, 108, 175, 176, 373  
untouchables 40, 41, 46, 47, 73, 76–78, 207, 246, 261, 281, 361, 369, 434, 563  
upper backward castes 349, 351, 353, 440  
upper castes 207, 242, 245, 313, 322, 344, 346, 348, 349, 351, 352, 421, 503, 565–567, 569, 576, 579, 583  
Uttar Pradesh 154, 240, 321, 329, 377, 434, 435, 437, 439, 441, 442, 450, 451, 589, 590, 592; Article 15, constitutional provision 436; Article 16, constitutional provision 436; Article 338(5), constitutional provision 436; Article 340, constitutional provision 436; assistance to voluntary organizations 437–438; backward caste movement, rise of 321–323; backward movement in 323; Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) rule 440–442; channels of mobilization 325–327; computer education, scheme 438; constitutional guarantees 435–436; construction of hostels, OBC boys and girls 437; developmental dynamics 323–325; Indian National Congress approach 438–439; mapping OBC leadership 328–329; model of mobilization 327–328; Mulayam Singh Yadav and Samajwadi Party 332–334; new OBC discourse in 338–339; new OBC experiment 339–340; OBC mobilization, drawbacks 330; OBC politics decline and Samajwadi Party 339; other backward classes and state policies 433–442; political regimes and 438–442; post-matric scholarship 437; pre-matric scholarship 437; profile OBCs 330–331; prominent OBC leaders, showcasing 329–330; Samajwadi Party, social base 334–338; Samajwadi Party (SP) regime 439–440; Samajwadi Party's loss, 2014 Lok Sabha elections 338; socio-economic conditions, OBCs 436–437; welfare programs 437–438
- Vaartha Tarangini* 572  
*Vaishyas* (traders) 1  
Vanniyakula Kshatriya Maha Sangam 264  
Vanniyars 254, 255; aspirations and assertions 261–266  
Vaudeville, C. 27  
Vedic-Brahmanic knowledge 28  
Vedic spiritual system 15

## *Index*

- Veerabhadriya women 554–556; needs of community 555–556  
Veerasingam 572  
*Venkaramanna vs State of Madras* 113  
Verma, A.K. 593, 594  
Vidyasagar, Iswar Chandra 364  
village society 50, 52, 91, 362, 486  
*Vinaya-pitika* 14  
virtue 68  
*Vivekavardhini* 572  
vote share 333, 334, 336–338, 347, 586, 587, 592, 593  
*Vrutthantini* 572
- Waldrop, Anne 355  
Washbrook, D. 151n8
- Weber, M. 102  
West Bengal 201, 238, 370, 372, 373, 375–379, 448, 451, 456 *see Bengal*  
women 58, 61, 62, 164–170, 509–512, 517, 520–522, 524, 526, 527, 529–530, 532, 534, 541, 545; and development 4  
workers 39, 74, 77, 84, 159, 266, 272, 418, 447, 452, 453, 465  
working class 45, 49, 50, 74, 77, 84, 306, 309, 313  
work participation rate 446, 452, 453, 459, 465  
World Trade Organization (WTO) regime 181
- Yadav, Akhilesh 336, 338–340, 442  
Yadav, K.C. 225, 393  
Yadav, Mulayam Singh 206



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